

# Madison's African Americans have fewer black-owned nightspots even as population grows

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Pool at Vitale's, then dancing at Purlie's, then winding down at Mr. P's. For a generation, the three taverns within a mile of each other gave blacks on the South Side places in their neighborhood to mingle after dark.

Hedi LaMarr Rudd watched her parents — her stepdad is black, her mom is white — head out to the nightspots along the Park Street corridor and listened when they came home to exciting stories of nights out with friends.



"I couldn't wait to turn 21," she said.

However, since the three bars closed in the late 1990s, taverns that cater to blacks have assumed another pattern.

"We call them grand opening grand closings," said Dwayne Williams, a UW-Madison budget analyst who has a side business as a music and events promoter.

The city's black population has more than doubled during the past two decades, with almost 17,000 blacks now calling Madison home, according to 2010 census figures. But just two of the city's hundreds of bars are known to be owned by black people.

In the last decade, other bars that cater to blacks have opened and closed, often because of violence and police calls caused by younger patrons.

R Place on Park, which is facing license revocation for sporadic violence over the past year, claims its problems have to do mostly with the city's crackdown on other black bars, sending the younger patrons — and their problems — its way.

## **Unequal enforcement?**

Finding answers to the cyclical problems with black bars can be tricky. R Place owner Rick Flowers alleges unequal enforcement, saying the city goes straight for punitive actions when it comes to black bars but shows more leniency when problems occur at bars with primarily white customers.

Karen Reece, a research scientist at a local biotech company, echoed that concern, saying in a letter to the city that she goes to R Place for its live music and never has felt unsafe.

She pointed to a State Journal front page in October with two stories: one about the city's efforts to shut down R Place after weekend violence, the other about the city's commitment of money and resources to

keep State Street bars open and safe during Freakfest after years of alcohol- fueled Halloween violence by mostly white revelers.

"It is reasonable to expect the city to show R Place ... the same respect it shows the State Street community," she wrote.

Police Chief Noble Wray and Alcohol License Review Commission chairman David Hart both are black, and city officials deny unequal enforcement.

"The question is, would this (violence and related activity) be tolerated if the bar was on Monroe or Williamson Street?" asked Ald. Tim Bruer, a South Side City Council member since 1984 and former chairman of the ALRC. "The answer is absolutely not."

He said R Place's problems with the city are of its own making and pointed to another black-owned South Side bar, South Bay Lounge on Raywood Road. Since David Arms opened South Bay in 2006, it has faced no discipline by the city and few police calls while managing to attract a mostly middle-aged, mixed-race clientele.

"He took an establishment in a very similar neighborhood (as R Place), had a solid business plan, takes on full responsibility for the behavior of his patrons and has zero tolerance for drugs and weapons," Bruer said.

Bruer said the community has moved on since the three iconic bars along Park Street closed in the second half of the 1990s.

All three bars, while providing social and cultural outlets for South Side blacks, also brought problems to the neighborhood: noise, sporadic violence, public drunkenness. Each faced official discipline and was threatened with shutdown at various times but was able to remain open until the owners decided for various reasons to close.

Bruer credited the owners with acknowledging their problems and working with the city to find solutions.

He also pointed out some positive developments along the Park Street corridor: a spruced-up public library and Urban League building, an MATC satellite campus and Centro Hispano's headquarters.

"The neighborhood has seen a tremendous turnaround," he said.

### **'Support of your people'**

But those explanations will do nothing to douse the long-held frustrations by local blacks.

"For the number of African-Americans we have in this city right now, it is shameful that we have only one or two black-owned bars," said Frances Hamilton, a 62-year-old South Sider. Her father, the Rev. Joe Dawson, was for 30 years a legendary pastor at Mt. Zion Baptist church, which opened in 1911.

Hamilton remembers when Madison's black community had just a few churches and has watched with pride as many churches sprouted as the community grew. But the wealth of churches doesn't compensate for the dearth of taverns, she said: Not everyone goes to church, and everyone deserves a place to call home after work.

"It's very important to have the support of your people," said Ray Oldenburg, a Florida-based sociologist and national expert on the decline of neighborhood bars.

Having a local watering hole matters in minority communities, he said, because minorities feel marginalized in broader society, making it especially important they have a place to feel comfortable and accepted.

Before he was police chief, then-Sgt. Wray said in a 1990 State Journal story that he feared the city would shut down Purlie's, which generated 261 police calls the previous year, by far the most of any bar in the city.

Despite the problems, Wray said he hoped the city and the tavern would work together so it could stay open in a way that protected patrons and the neighborhood.

"There are only two black bars culturally in town, and if this one closes, there would be a real question about where the customers would go," he told the paper.

Now 50, Wray remembers his time as a young black man in Madison.

While he called the city home, he took a "regional approach" to entertainment, heading to Milwaukee and Chicago some weekends for their rich offerings of black nightlife.

As police chief, he remains concerned about having cultural and social outlets for the city's growing black population.

"It's a legitimate concern on the part of African-Americans who work hard every day and would like to have a venue to go out and listen to some music," he said.

### **Catering to everyone**

The problem in Madison and other cities of its size and demographics is that bars struggle to survive financially catering to just one slice of the black market, be it the younger hip-hop crowd or the middle-aged jazz scene. It leads to consolidation of multiple groups into one space.

"When it's just one bar and that one bar is supposed to cater to an entire community, it's very difficult to do that," he said.

At R Place, most of the problems with violence have come from younger patrons, a demographic Flowers said he didn't intend to attract.

In a letter to the city, he wrote that the 2009 closure or change in management of nine bars around the region that cater to younger blacks sent them — and often their problems — to R Place.

"So in turn, we ... are being victimized by the enforcement of policies throughout the area," he wrote.

Williams, the promoter, agreed patrons migrate from one bar to the next.

"In Madison, you'll see someone in a nice tailored suit next to a kid in jeans and gym shoes," he said.

"There's such a lack of options here that bar owners have to try to cater to both."



**1. Mr. P's Place**



**3. Vitale's Lounge**



**2. Purlie's**

Photos from State Journal archives

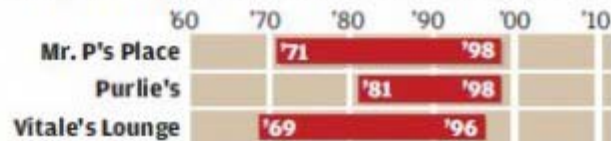


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In the 1980s and 1990s, African-Americans had three taverns to choose from along the Park Street corridor (approximate open and close dates at right):

1. Mr. P's Place, with owner Roger Parks' son Eugene
2. Purlie's, with owner Dewitt Moore
3. Vitale's Lounge

**Longevity** All three of the bars closed in the late '90s.



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