

## Rufus Rockhead and Rockhead's Paradise

In 1928 Rufus Rockhead, an entrepreneur and businessman, founded Rockhead's Paradise, a Jazz club in the Little Burgundy neighbourhood of Montreal. Known as Montreal's most famous black nightclub, Rockhead's Paradise<sup>1</sup> was a popular hang-out for Montreal's black community. During its fifty year tenure, Rockhead's Paradise saw the likes of American jazz greats including Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Leadbelly, Nina Simone, Fats Waller, Dizzy Gillespie and Sammy Davis Jr. and gave career starts to people like Oscar Peterson, Oliver Jones and Billy Georgette, just to name a few<sup>2</sup>.

Rufus Nathaniel Rockhead was born in Maroon Town, Jamaica sometime near the end of the nineteenth century. Rufus came from a long line of Maroons, who fought for their independence and freedom against British rule in Jamaica during the centuries of slavery on the island. Having been born and raised in Maroon Town, one can assume that Rufus was taught his family's history and the various customs that governed Maroon Town and its people for centuries. At approximately age 26, Rufus sailed to Halifax, and made his way to Montreal. On January 29, 1918, Rufus joined the Canadian Army and served in the Infantry as a private first-class with the 1st Depot Battalion of the 1st Quebec regiment, making \$15 a month.<sup>3</sup> Rufus served in France during World War I and earned a British War Medal and a Victory Medal for his service. On March 19, 1919, he returned home to Montreal.<sup>4</sup> Once home, he ran a shoeshine stand before becoming a railway porter for the Canadian Pacific Railway, one of the few jobs that black men in Canada were able to get during that time.<sup>5</sup> During his eight years as a porter, Rufus worked the Montreal to Chicago route and ran a lucrative side business smuggling bootleg liquor into the United States, due to prohibition, the nationwide constitutional ban on the production, importation, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages.. Due to these restrictions, many U.S. citizens who were willing to buy alcohol from the Canadian railway porters.

Having met at their local church<sup>6</sup>, Rufus and Elizabeth (Bertie) got married sometime in 1927 and had three children, Kenneth, Jacqueline and Arvilla. Before going to Rockhead's

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<sup>1</sup> John Gilmore, "Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal", (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.193)

<sup>2</sup> Bill Brownstein, *Rockhead's Last Jam: Paradise regained – for a night*, The Gazette ( June 28th, 2012): [http://www.montrealgazette.com/entertainment/music/Rockhead+Last+Paradise+regained+night/6850788/story.htm](http://www.montrealgazette.com/entertainment/music/Rockhead+Last+Paradise+regained+night/6850788/story.html)  
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<sup>3</sup> Rohinton Ghandhi, *Rockhead's Paradise Club – The House that Rockhead Built* (Concordia University Records Management and Archives: <http://100objects.qahn.org/content/swizzle-sticks-rockheads-paradise-1928>)

<sup>4</sup> John Gilmore, "Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal", (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.163)

<sup>5</sup> John Gilmore, "Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal", (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.163)

<sup>6</sup> Rohinton Ghandhi, *Rockhead's Paradise Club – The House that Rockhead Built* (Concordia University Records Management and Archives: <http://100objects.qahn.org/content/swizzle-sticks-rockheads-paradise-1928>)

Paradise and putting in long hours, Rufus would start his day with breakfast (the only meal he ate with his family) with Elizabeth and their children.<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth passed away in 1962.

Rufus's job as a porter came to an end sometime in 1927 when word got to him that the police were waiting for him at Windsor station, near Montreal, to most likely question and arrest him about his liquor smuggling. Rufus was able to get off the train at a stop before Windsor station and went into hiding until the attention on him blew over.<sup>8</sup> Rufus, with the money he had saved from selling liquor in the United States, was able to pursue a lifelong dream<sup>9</sup> of opening his own bar and then nightclub, featuring a live band, various musical acts and dancing. With more jazz music being made in Montreal than anywhere else in Canada for almost half a century<sup>10</sup>, it was only natural that Rufus opened a business that catered to the popularity of Jazz music during that time.

Due to Montreal and provincial officials not being in favour of black people owning bars<sup>11</sup>, it took Rufus two years to get the permit. In the meantime, Rufus bought a three storey, red brick building, that was located on the corner of Mountain and St. Antoine in Little Burgundy. Rufus turned the first floor into a tavern and lunch counter, he converted the second floor into a dining room, and on the third floor, there were fifteen rooms, which were used as a hotel. In 1930, after two years of trying to obtain a permit, according to Montreal author and historian Rohinton Ghandi, "Rockhead's Paradise club was officially opened, serving only wine and beer in its new second-floor dining room with a stage where local coloured jazz bands played."<sup>12</sup> With prohibition still in effect in the United States, people from the United States flocked to Montreal, known as the nightclub capital of Canada<sup>13</sup>, and American jazz musicians travelled to the city to perform; at the centre of it all was Rockhead's Paradise.

At this time in Montreal, many black people were actively discouraged from to owning bars and getting liquor permits, resulting in few options in terms of entertainment. Despite a hostile climate towards black people in both Canada and the US, Rufus Rockhead was able to open his own business and provide a safe place for black people in Montreal to be together, enjoy each other's company, and be entertained. Author John Gilmore said, "Always respectful, Rockhead ushered them into Paradise - in stark contrast to many white club owners uptown who made black patrons feel distinctly unwelcome, if they didn't refuse them entry altogether."<sup>14</sup> Rockhead's Paradise also provided a place where up and coming musicians could hone their

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<sup>7</sup> John Gilmore, "Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal", (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.164)

<sup>8</sup> John Gilmore, "Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal", (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.163)

<sup>9</sup> Rohinton Ghandi, *Rockhead's Paradise Club – The House that Rockhead Built* (Concordia University Records Management and Archives: <http://100objects.qahn.org/content/swizzle-sticks-rockheads-paradise-1928>)

<sup>10</sup> John Gilmore, "Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal", (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg. 13)

<sup>11</sup> John Gilmore, "Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal", (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.163-164)

<sup>12</sup> Rohinton Ghandi, *Rockhead's Paradise Club – The House that Rockhead Built* (Concordia University Records Management and Archives: <http://100objects.qahn.org/content/swizzle-sticks-rockheads-paradise-1928>)

<sup>13</sup> Marian Scott, *Rockhead's Paradise regained: treasure from Montreal jazz's golden age*, (Montreal Gazette, May 29th, 2018: <https://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/music/remembrance-of-jazz-past>)

<sup>14</sup> John Gilmore, "Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal", (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.167)

skills. For example famed Canadian Jazz pianists, Oscar Peterson and Oliver Jones, were able to play and get their starts at Rockhead's Paradise.

Despite the closing of Rockhead's cocktail lounge and club being shut down for nine years and the thousands of dollars that Rufus Rockhead poured into the club to complete renovations<sup>15</sup>, especially after it reopened in the 1960s, it was becoming clear that times were changing in the music scene. John Gilmore said this: "By then, however, the kind of show biz that Rockhead's Paradise had been famous for was on the wane in Montreal. The St. Antoine district was suffering from urban decay, and the once-famous corner of Mountain and St. Antoine was no longer a popular centre for nightlife."<sup>16</sup> Even after Rufus handed management of the club over to his son, Kenneth, and a revival of sorts occurred with a younger clientele because the club began showcasing soul, Motown and R&B. Rockhead's Paradise, reached the height of its success and was sold in 1977 by Kenneth. I believe the goal of Rockhead's Paradise, was to provide a safe place for the enjoyment and entertainment of all who frequented the establishment, especially the black community and I believe Rufus ultimately achieved this goal, despite the many challenges it faced.

Rufus was also able to provide jobs at Rockhead's Paradise to those in Montreal's black community who were struggling due to the Great Depression (1929-1939). Gilmore says, "When the Depression struck, Rockhead tried to ease the hardship for the local black community by hiring as many staff as he could afford to, even when there was little work to be done." Thus, Rockhead's Paradise not only became popular for providing world class entertainment, but also for providing work for some in the black community, who were encountering economic challenges. Rufus also used the club to give back to the black community. On some occasions, he organized matinee shows for the children in the community and served pop and sandwiches to them during these shows.<sup>17</sup> He also created a special family show at the club for Christmas and allowed youths, who showed potential as musicians, to play alongside older musicians at the club in order and hone their musical skills.<sup>18</sup>

Rockhead's Paradise not only serviced the black community in Montreal, but it also serviced white clientele. Gilmore says the club "...depended on a steady stream of whites up the stairs to keep the gears of Paradise well oiled."<sup>19</sup> Thus, the popularity and influence of Rockhead's Paradise was felt throughout Montreal and not just within the local black community.

Rockhead's Paradise was a 300 seat club<sup>20</sup> that enjoyed many visitors throughout its 50 year tenure. Although I was not able to find exact statistics on how much money Rufus made or

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<sup>15</sup> John Gilmore, "Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal", (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.194)

<sup>16</sup> John Gilmore, "Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal", (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.195)

<sup>17</sup> John Gilmore, "Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal", (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.164)

<sup>18</sup> John Gilmore, "Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal", (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.164)

<sup>19</sup> John Gilmore, "Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal", (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.167)

<sup>20</sup> Rohinton Gandhi, Rockhead's Paradise Club – The House that Rockhead Built (Concordia University Records Management and Archives: <http://100objects.qahn.org/content/swizzle-sticks-rockheads-paradise-1928>)

the number of customers , the information I have collected suggests that the club was extremely popular and had visitors and tourists (specifically from the States), come year after year. Even after a nine year shutdown of the club and cocktail lounge<sup>21</sup> , Rockhead's Paradise re-opened and was still entertaining visitors. Although there is no information on the specific financial gains Rufus experienced as a result of his club, Rohinton Ghandi believes Rockhead's Paradise made Rufus wealthy.

Rufus Rockhead and Rockhead's Paradise achieved significant success during its peak years, from 1930 until about 1950. American jazz legends such as Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Leadbelly, Nina Simone, Fats Waller, Dizzy Gillespie and Sammy Davis Jr., among countless others made their way to the club to perform.<sup>22</sup> Rockhead's Paradise also saw the likes of American boxer Joe Louis and the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team visit the club.<sup>23</sup> Although Rufus Rockhead and Rockhead's Paradise may not be a well known story to many Canadians, his story and accomplishments are acknowledged in Montreal and continue to be recognized through walking tours, documentaries and reunion concerts that pay tribute to the legendary club and its exemplary founder.<sup>24</sup> In 1989, Montreal paid tribute and memorialized Rufus by naming a street, Rue Rufus-Rockhead, after him in the Little Burgundy neighbourhood of Montreal.<sup>25</sup>

Affectionately known for always having a red flower on his lapel and for handing women a rose as they entered his club<sup>26</sup> , Rufus Rockhead was a gentleman and took pride in his business. According to John Gilmore, Rufus Nathaniel Rockhead “...was a gracious, sober host and became widely respected in the black community, whose interests he took to heart.”<sup>27</sup> Having not known too much at all about Rufus Rockhead, I was delighted to research him and find out more about his life achievements.

For a black man in the late 1920s, who immigrated from Jamaica, to go to a country that was restricting Black immigration, and a city that disapproved of black people owning businesses (in particular bars), what Rufus was able to accomplish is truly inspirational! Not only did Rufus create a thriving business for himself, he also utilized the success of the club to benefit his community, give back to them and helped to give opportunities to young musicians, who may not have had the opportunity to showcase their talents elsewhere. Rufus Rockhead passed away

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<sup>21</sup> John Gilmore, “Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal”, (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.194)

<sup>22</sup> Bill Brownstein, Rockhead's Last Jam: Paradise regained – for a night, The Gazette ( June 28th, 2012): <http://www.montrealgazette.com/entertainment/music/Rockhead+Last+Paradise+regained+night/6850788/story.html>

<sup>23</sup> John Gilmore, “Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal”, (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.167)

<sup>24</sup> Marian Scott, *Rockhead's Paradise regained: treasure from Montreal jazz's golden age*, (Montreal Gazette, May 29th, 2018: <https://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/music/remembrance-of-jazz-past>)

<sup>25</sup> Commission de toponymie du Quebec, *The streets of Montreal: historical repertoire* , 1995: [http://www.toponymie.gouv.qc.ca/ct/ToposWeb/Fiche.aspx?no\\_seq=256768](http://www.toponymie.gouv.qc.ca/ct/ToposWeb/Fiche.aspx?no_seq=256768)

<sup>26</sup> Rohinton Ghandi, Rockhead's Paradise Club – The House that Rockhead Built (Concordia University Records Management and Archives: <http://100objects.qahn.org/content/swizzle-sticks-rockheads-paradise-1928>)

<sup>27</sup> John Gilmore, “Swinging in Paradise-The Story of Jazz in Montreal”, (Vehicule Press: 1988, pg.164)

on September 23rd, 1981 at the Ste. Anne de Bellevue Veterans Hospital, in Quebec. As a Canadian woman with Jamaican heritage, I am proud to know that Rufus Rockhead was capable of fulfilling his lifelong dream of owning his own business at a time in history when the odds were stacked against Black people.

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