

IF ORGANIZED CRIME COULD MAKE IT IN **NEW** **YORK...**

WORDS: CHRISTA AVAMPATO

IMAGES: WIKICOMMONS



CHRISTA AVAMPATO IS AN AWARD WINNING
AUTHOR AND FILM-MAKER. SHE IS ALSO A WRITER
FOR THE WASHINGTON POST AND GUIDE FOR
UNTAPPED CITIES IN NEW YORK.

IT COULD MAKE IT **ANYWHERE!**

“The parties were bigger... the pace was faster...and the morals were looser,” F. Scott Fitzgerald on Prohibition

The early haunts of organized crime have been largely erased from today's New York City. Yet, this is where organized crime grew from a ragtag set of small-time criminals to a slick and brutal machine. In many ways, the structure of organized crime today—now an international, highly-intricate web—traces its inspiration and roots to New York, particularly the era from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. From the Gangs of New York to *The Godfather*, this is where and when crime became big business. harmony and speed.

Rival gangs (known then and now as “families”) formed and feuded in the mid-1800s as waves of immigrants began to pour into Ellis Island from Europe. They fought over territory, power, and the control of goods flooding New York as it rapidly became the largest port city in the world. The Lower East Side, Little Italy, and Five Points neighbourhoods are the stages on which these battles played to their often-fatal end.

Nineteenth-century organized crime remained fairly small and localized by today's standards until New York, and the entire country, handed its families an enormous gift with unintended and unforeseen consequences: Prohibition. From 1920 to 1933, the dry movement nearly a century in the making prohibited bootlegging—the illegal manufacture, distribution, and sale (but not the drinking) of alcohol. Almost immediately, bootlegging gave crime families a hot commodity with enormous demand and even bigger profits.

No other city had a hankering for liquor more than New York, and no other city had as many crime families either. Though Al Capone's infamous Chicago bootlegging market is a favourite of historians, New York was the crown jewel of alcohol during Prohibition. Throughout the era, New Yorkers consumed more alcohol than any other city in the country. There were anywhere from 32,000 to 100,000 speakeasies and 5,000 nightclubs in New York by 1925.

Organized crime had a heavy hand in the transport of alcohol around New York. Rum Row originally lived 3 miles off the coast of New York where that waters were no longer in any government's legal jurisdiction. Modern-day pirates who captained a line of boats carrying liquor (including but not at all limited to rum) from the Caribbean, Canada, and Europe dropped anchor to create a kind of alcoholic bazaar. Speakeasy owners would travel out to Rum Row, shop for what they wanted, and then have it secretly delivered via organized crime networks on speedboats that would attempt (and often succeed) to outrun the Coast Guard.



Credit: Wikimedia Commons/Library of Congress

To make things more difficult, the government campaigned and won the battle to move Rum Row out to 12 miles off the coast. Criminals like a challenge and though this new line made it more difficult for crime families to bootleg liquor, it also made them more inventive. The speedboats got faster, the liquor got more expensive, and they developed sophisticated networks to get the liquor around the city to speakeasies once it arrived on land.

One family even started a legitimate cab business with alcohol as its only passenger to shuttle it around right under the noses of the police.

Additionally, the crime families figured if the government was going to make it more difficult for alcohol to get to land, then they would stage parties on the boats that rivalled any Mardi Gras before or since. Organized crime built the Wild West of the 1920s on Rum Row, and controlled access to and from it. Yes, the boats were full of liquor. They were also full of every other illicit activity someone might want. Anything came and went out there. Those ships comprised a lawless land on an open sea, and it kept organized crime afloat despite government crackdowns.

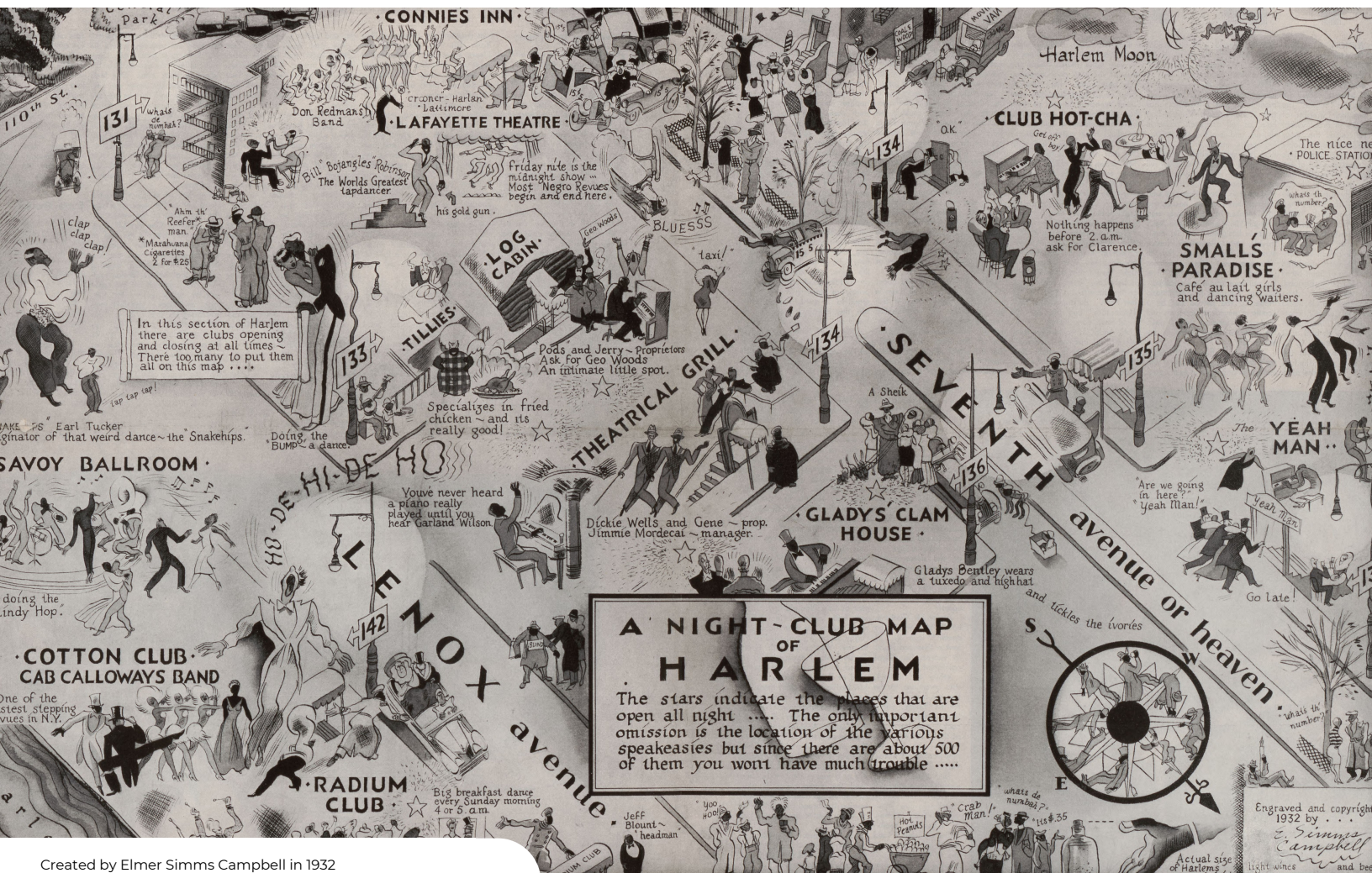
While the rich and well-heeled New Yorkers in the 1920s took their drinks in midtown-Manhattan's glamorous spots like the 21 Club (which is one of only two remaining original speakeasies in the city), thrill-seekers made their party in Harlem.

Black and Tans, as they were often called because they literally created space for the mixing of people of different races, were tucked away in every

"It is the prohibition that makes anything precious." Mark Twain

conceivable space: basements and backyards of brownstones, backrooms and second floors of legitimate bars and restaurants, and industrial-like structures like garages and workshops. Plentiful hooch joints and buffet flats with fanciful names offered much more than booze—full homemade meals (the more you eat, the more you drink!), dancing, floorshows, and music were all on offer.

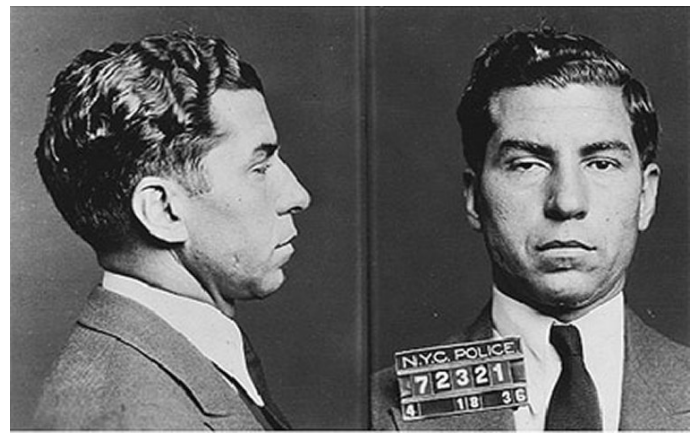
The liquor, laughter, and love flowed to the soundtrack of a new kind of music that would be celebrated the world over long after the Prohibition parties ended, and that soundtrack was jazz. Before they were household names, the biggest names in jazz got their start in the speakeasies of Harlem supplied by organized crime's advanced bootlegging operation. Jazz and its stars are so closely tied to the Prohibition era that there is an argument to be made that jazz may not have become the worldwide phenomenon it was



Created by Elmer Simms Campbell in 1932 Originally for Dell Publishing Company for their magazine Manhattan Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division



Murals of Dizzy Gillespie, jazz legend
Photos by Christa Avampato, 2019
Murals by Brandon "B-Mike" Odums and Marthalicia Mattarita
135th Street in Harlem



Mugshot of Charles "Lucky" Luciano in 1936 Italian-American mobster and one of the most powerful mob bosses during Prohibition. Luciano was reportedly making millions of dollars in bootlegging profits by the mid-1920s (Wikimedia Commons)

without Prohibition. As Mark Twain famously said, Prohibition is what makes things precious.

The Alhambra Ballroom had Billie Holiday on its staff before they discovered she could sing, and thankfully they quickly made that discovery. With the hard-hitting talents of Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, and Count Basie, the Alhambra became one of the most famous clubs in the world known for its epic swing dance battles. It continued its business into the 1960s.

The Sugar Cane Club did not have the longevity of the Alhambra, but during Prohibition its crowds were legendary. Its location on 135th Street and Fifth Avenue was a stronghold in the Harlem Renaissance movement that showcased a blossoming of African American art, writing, and music. As a speakeasy and nightclub, it was home to jazz giants such as Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, and Louis Armstrong.

Owned by Ed Smalls, Small's Paradise was the setting history points to when discussing racially integrated speakeasies. Smalls was the only African American to own a Harlem speakeasy during Prohibition. The dancing and roller skating waitstaff, over-the-top floorshows, and big names in music were its hallmarks, and they played well into the morning hours. Their breakfast and its matching 6am performance were renowned. Like the Alhambra, Small's had a life beyond Prohibition. In 1943, Malcolm Little was a waiter at Small's. Less than a decade later, he would become one of the most famous men in the world—Malcolm X.

New York's origin story of its organized crime scene provides us with one of the most tangled, fascinating periods of time in the U.S. Music, racial integration, politics, commerce, culture, and immigration are all threads in its web, and history is still weaving the fabric of its stories and legacies.