

People

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Toronto through the eyes of Carl Allen

Jamaican-born Carl Allen has traveled the globe as a DJ, but prefers the city of Toronto to all others. Since the 90's, Allen has become a restaurateur and purveyor of soul food alongside business partner Carl Cassell. Currently Allen runs Harlem Restaurant on Richmond as well as its new sister spot, Harlem Underground on Queen West. Both exist to provide a sense of community, a performance space, and that rare Toronto offering that is a soul food menu. As Allen and I talked about

restaurants, soul food and the city, the smell of freshly made corn bread wafted up to us, making me more than a little hungry.

How many restaurants have you been involved in?

I used to own Soul Food Bistro on Yonge, which was probably one of the first soul food restaurants after Underground Railroad closed down. After that I was involved in Soul on Spadina, which was a huge soul food and live venue and from that point I got involved with Irie in 1999 and then the club thing. I was part of the Living Room for 11 years on Adelaide, Hush nightclub after Living Room closed down, and that's pretty much the ones that people would know.

What was the idea behind opening Harlem?

One of the things that was missing [in Toronto] was great soul food.

We were looking for a space to offer soul food, live entertainment and a place for friends to hang out. That brought us into a space where we feature local artists, photographers, musicians, singers, poets...it became a platform where someone could come and show their stuff and perform.

The location is great, as the area is growing by leaps and bounds. There are probably eight or nine condo projects going up within 300 yards of this space. There's nothing much on the east side unless you want to go down to King Street, which for the most part is a little on the higher end.

Why did you open [Harlem Underground](#) in Irie's space on Queen West?

About five months ago. This place was doing well and Irie had run its course. The West Indian thing wasn't carrying through the fall and winter, and so we had to make some difficult choices.

Why do you think there haven't been many other real competitors in the soul food game in the city?

I don't know! I don't think anyone's really looked at Toronto's demographic as a whole in this regard. I think that what people have done is to look at what has been successful and then try to copy that. That's why you have 2,700 Italian restaurants in the city and 1,300 French restaurants and so many restaurateurs opting to do the fine dining thing.

You know what? Toronto isn't a fine dining city. People do it from time to time, but on a general level, people aren't spending their money on a pretty presentation.

What are other great gathering places for the Caribbean community in Toronto?

Without having one-off events and stuff like that, there aren't that many places that are really and truly Caribbean owned and operated or black owned and operated. There's a couple of places ... [The Real Jerk](#) has been a staple in Toronto forever. Both my partner and I used to work at the Real Jerk. He was a busboy and I was a DJ.

There's also a place called [Sydney's Island](#), out in Mississauga.

There are a lot of spaces that offer entertainment for the community, like [Joe Mamas](#)...but as far as black-owned and operated there's not a whole lot at all.

What are some of the best places to DJ in the city?

I do a lot of different styles of stuff, so it depends on what I'm spinning. Some of the spaces on College Street...like Octopus Lounge, for instance. I also do Shallow Groove, and of course you have the Guvernment and Kool Haus for more of a younger clientele. I used to do Lobby on Bloor for three years...if there's been a club in the city, I've pretty much played it.

Harlem was named one of [the best jazz bars in the city](#) on blogTO.

What's your take on Toronto's jazz club scene?

Toronto's jazz club scene has died. I remember back in the day when the Top of the Senator was open, along with Montreal Bistro and Diana's, but that time has past. And unfortunately jazz artists are very expensive to bring into the city.

Most jazz venues are not very big rooms. Top of the Senator was a very beautiful room, but not that big. Then you get into something like Montreal Bistro which was too big. Reservoir Lounge might have found that happy medium.

It all depends on what type of jazz you're looking for...if you're looking for traditional jazz you've got the Rex, one of the last bastions out

there. It's unfortunate because there's a large jazz community that isn't being supported.

The Haiti benefit that goes on every Wednesday, how long will that run?

For a year. I find that people jump on bandwagons. With any kind of disaster, everyone comes out for the first two or three months ... [until] the media [says] "okay that disaster is done -- it's time for another." Unfortunately the people involved in the disaster don't move on. This is not going to go away next week, next month or even next year.

I think doing this on an ongoing basis does a couple of things, it keeps awareness out there. It keeps the dialogue going, and it makes the younger generation in particular aware of what happens outside their cozy little borders. It might help steer them in a different path or they might start to see things in a different light.