

Nacirema Club, Minneapolis



FROM THE 1930S to the 1970s, a tight-knit African American business and residential district, born out of racial discrimination and restrictive covenants that limited housing and employment opportunities, formed in South Minneapolis around the intersection of East Thirty-Eighth Street and Fourth Avenue South. The neighborhood, bounded by East Thirty-Fourth and Forty-Sixth Streets and Nicollet Avenue to Chicago Avenue, was and is home to the state's longest-running black-owned newspaper, the *Minnesota Spokesman-Recorder* (founded in 1934). Among the notable residents of the neighborhood was Lena Olive Smith, prominent civil rights lawyer and activist, whose house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. For two months in 1951, Willie Mays lived on Fourth Avenue while playing baseball for the Minneapolis Millers before being called up to the San Francisco Giants.

The neighborhood was also home to the Nacirema Club (its name "American" spelled backward), located at 3949 Fourth Avenue South. The social club, open from 1955 to 1987, with a membership of 600 in 1968, was known for hosting community group meetings, Christmas parties, fashion shows, and jazz musicians on weekends. Club officers included Minneapolis residents Charles Rhodes, a Golden Gloves and professional prizefighter, and Anthony Cassius, a local labor organizer and owner of another neighborhood landmark, the Dreamland Café, the first dressed-up nightclub in Minneapolis to welcome African Americans at a time when the city was heavily segregated.

During the 1960s and 1970s, segregation made it difficult for African American bands to get gigs at clubs catering to whites. A gigging circuit arose around a small number of clubs open to African American musicians. The Nacirema was on this circuit, along with the Cozy Bar, the

Flame, and the Foxtrot. In the 1960s, jazz musicians such as the Bobby Lyle group played for large weekend crowds at the Nacirema. By the 1970s, the club hosted soul singer Wee Willie Walker and his band, Solid on Down. The funk band Flyte Tyme, featuring future local legends Terry Lewis and Jimmy Jam, often opened for Walker, and Prince occasionally played with Walker during his set.

The Nacirema Club lives on through historical sources. Recent reissues of 1970s recordings capture the sounds of Minneapolis funk music. Through stories and photography the MNHS Press book *Sights, Sounds, Soul: The Twin Cities Through the Lens of Charles Chamblis* (2017) portrays the vibrant social and artistic life of the local African American community, including the Nacirema Club, during the 1970s and 1980s. As of 2018, the building that housed the Nacirema for three decades is home to El Bethel Baptist Church.

—Jackie Beckey

The Nacirema Club (here in 1975) was a south Minneapolis African American community mainstay from 1955 to 1987. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)





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