

STORK CLUB

3 EAST 53<sup>RD</sup> ST. N.Y.C.

## STORIES FROM PIPA BILL

### *THE STORK CLUB*

If the following pages seem to be overwhelmingly photos that lack substance, that is only because that is the way it was. In WWII and the post-war years, there was no place on earth more accurately described as the place "to see and be seen" than the Stork Club located at 3 East 53<sup>rd</sup> in New York City. It is probable that the term *cafe society* originated there.

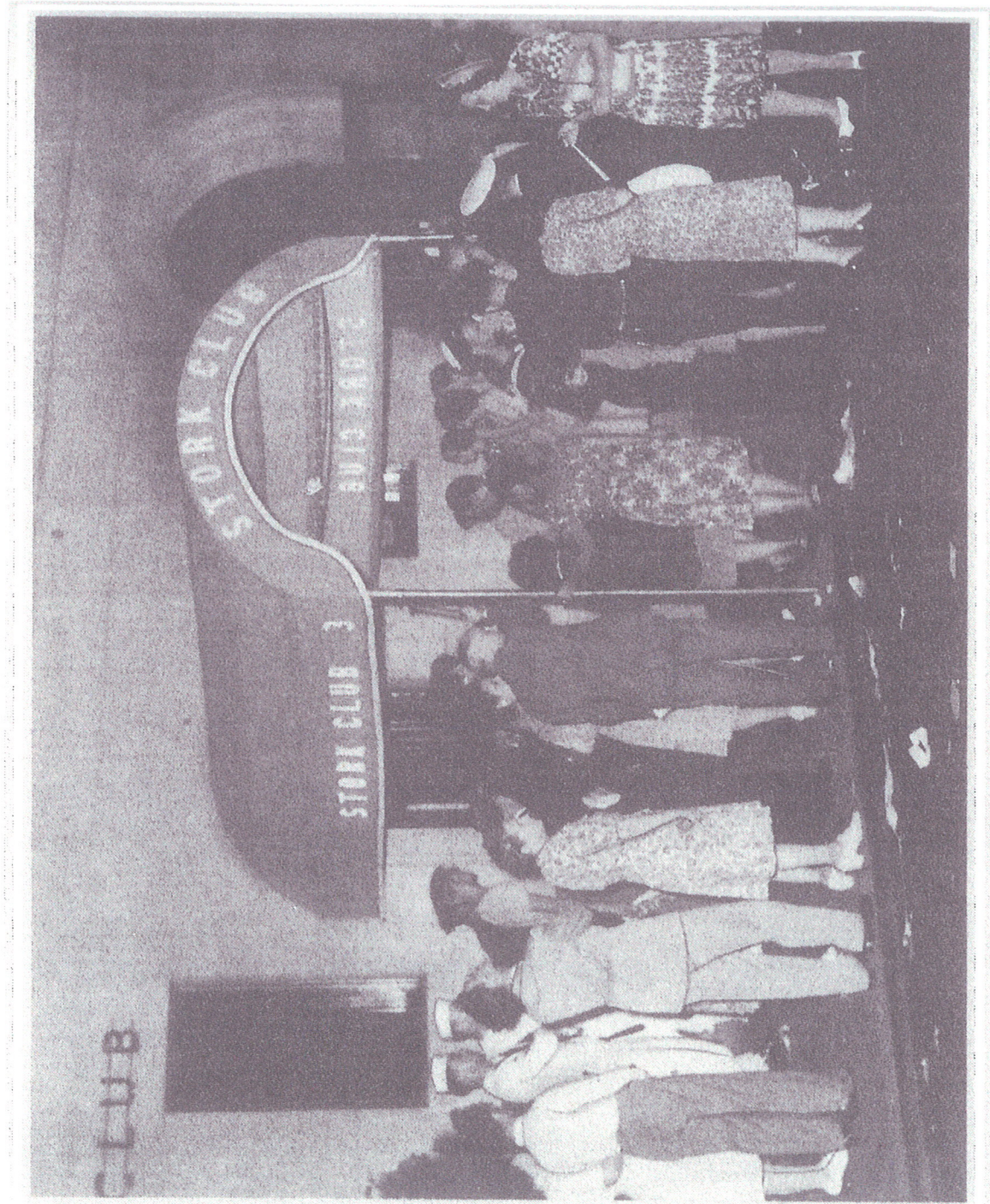
From the Roaring Twenties to the chaotic sixties, Sherman Billingsley's Stork Club was America's most enchanting nightclub. It was a glittering world where starlets stalked millionaires, where Jack wooed Jackie, and where Prince Rainier wooed Grace Kelly. It was where Hemingway knocked down the warden of Sing Sing, headwaiters reaped \$20,000 tips, and Walter Winchell, the Stork's famed scribe-in-residence, snubbed the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. From Orson Welles to Joe DiMaggio, J. Edgar Hoover to Frank Costello, they all came to the Stork. (Blumenthal, Frontspiece)

The picture of my mother and me was taken on or about April 30, 1947 (see Appendix I and learn how I remember the date). Only a few weeks earlier, Rose Kennedy joined her son Robert at the Stork. I was eighteen (going on nineteen!) and on liberty from the Navy. While not really descriptive of me, it seems apropos to quote Blumenthal (p.40).

For pampered youth, admission to the Stork Club had become a rite of passage. Mary Ellin Berlin had been taken to the club by her father, Irving Berlin, on her nineteenth birthday in November 1945 – their visit made the cover of *Stork Club Talk* – but going there on a date for the first time was a privileged entree into *cafe society* and adulthood, a milestone akin to the first pair of high heels or the first cigarette.

Des Moines had its Stork habitues, e.g. Mike Cowles and Fred Bohen. Bohen, CEO and Chairman of Meredith Corporation, once had a lengthy and friendly visit in the Stork Cub Room with a returning veteran and offered him a job with an





A TYPICAL CROWD OF GAWKERS AND PATRONS OUTSIDE  
THE STORK CLUB IN THE LATE 1940s

important role in the family business, but the offeree demurred because he would return to his own family business. "What's your name?" asked Bohlen. "Edsel Ford."

Sherman Billingsley, a one-time bootlegger, came from Oklahoma to New York. His gangland connections served him well in providing staples during the war. But to the doorman he hired who bragged about knowing various hoodlums; Billingsley insisted, "keep out everybody you know."

The Stork Club thrived on gossip and the culture of celebrity, and no columnist ever paid for a meal or a drink there. Walter Winchell made the Stork his "home away from home" or, more accurately, his "office away from office." He and Billingsley had a symbiotic relationship giving power to each other.

The prime time of the Stork Club was also the prime of Winchell. Courted by presidents, earning \$800,000 a year during the Depression, riddled with his own uncertainties and dark furies, the increasingly monomaniacal Winchell used his power to reward his friends and punish his enemies. For years, one of those friends was Sherman Billingsley." (Hamill review)

Billingsley said he created the Cub Room (the club's sanctum sanctorum) out of love for his flame Ethel Merman who led the theatre crowd to the Stork like a Pied Piper (Cole Porter said she had a sound like a band going by) and often brought the whole cast from her show. But despite his affair with Merman, he was very much married and offered this advice to his women patrons (in an interview with *Good Housekeeping*). He had no similar instructions for men:

*Don't give reasons when going to the Ladies' Lounge. Omit the coy remarks. Simply excuse yourself ...*

*Don't become overfriendly with musicians. It isn't considered nice...*

*Don't talk to strangers at adjoining tables. And don't be too friendly*

*ever with people you know but who are not part of your party. Particularly, don't flirt – it is embarrassing to your escort ...*

*Don't table-hop, no matter how well you know the other guests. It often looks show-offy, and it's almost always annoying...*

*Don't accept notes sent to your table by strangers and never give your name, address or telephone number to anyone to whom you have not been properly introduced...*

*Don't engage in conversation with waiters. Don't give your order to a waiter – give it to your escort; he, not you, is supposed to do the ordering...*

*Don't hold conversations with cab drivers while going to or from nightclubs.*

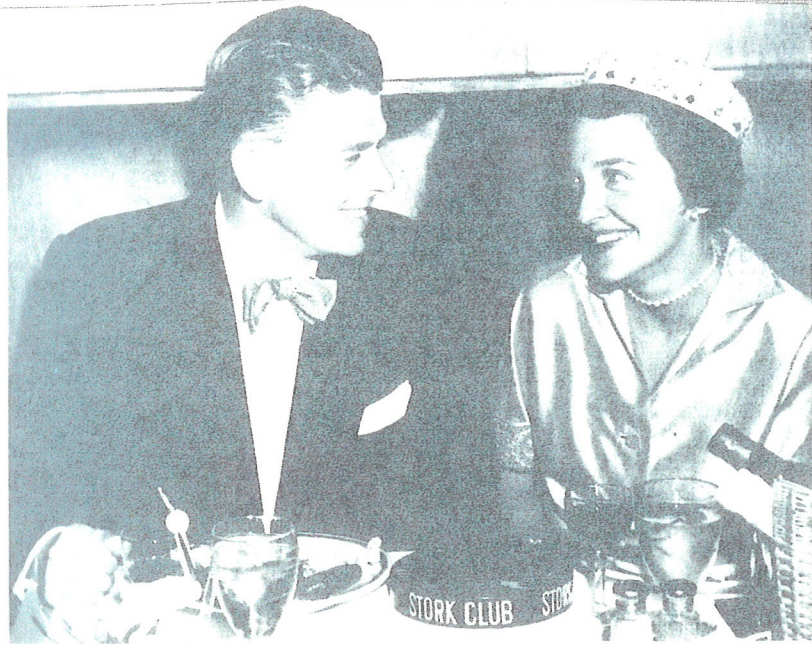
The Stork Club thrived on exclusivity. Keeping people out was the doorman's (with a gold rope!) major function and helped create the Stork's panache. Billingsley favored a homogeneous look and type, his client of choice being young and good looking, famous, influential, successful, rich, well-born and preferably WASP (mother and I only met the final qualifying acronym). Jews, however, frequented the club: Winchell, Al Jolson, Bert Lahr, and Hollywood's chieftains. Irving Berlin was a regular in the Cub Room. A short time after mother and I were there, I met Scootie Rollins and her sister Trudy in New York. While I remember the Stork Club as our probable destination, we either decided not to go (\$\$\$ a factor) or just failed to gain entry. "Admission to the holy place, along with a good table, was an achievement; rejection was a humiliation. Billingsley always had the last word." (Hamill) Mother had entry talents possessed by few. Among our nostalgic trivia is Billingsley's business card. He would not have handed these out on the street corner, and clearly he and mother had some kind of interface. Let's hope it was accompanied, as was often the case, by the club's exclusive perfume, *Sortilege*.

SHERMAN BILLINGSLEY

STORK CLUB



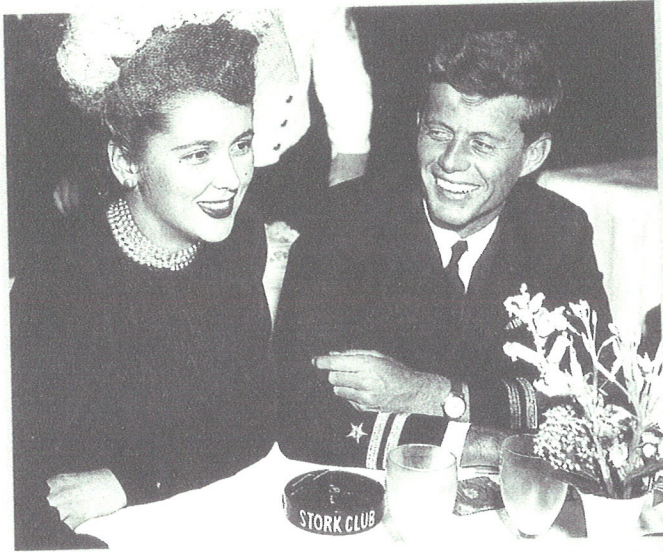




Leading Man: Newlyweds Ronald Reagan and Nancy Davis enjoy a night on the town at the Stork Club in New York City. (*Wide World*)



Ronald and Nancy Reagan in the early 1950s at the Stork Club in New York. The Reagans usually avoided the nightclub scene and settled into quiet domestic life in the Hollywood film colony.



LIEUTENANT JOHN F. KENNEDY WITH FLO PRITCHETT

TEDDY, JACK, AND BOBBY KENNEDY AT JFK'S PARTY

JACK AND JACKIE KENNEDY AT JFK'S THIRTY-NINTH BIRTHDAY PARTY ON MAY 17, 1956

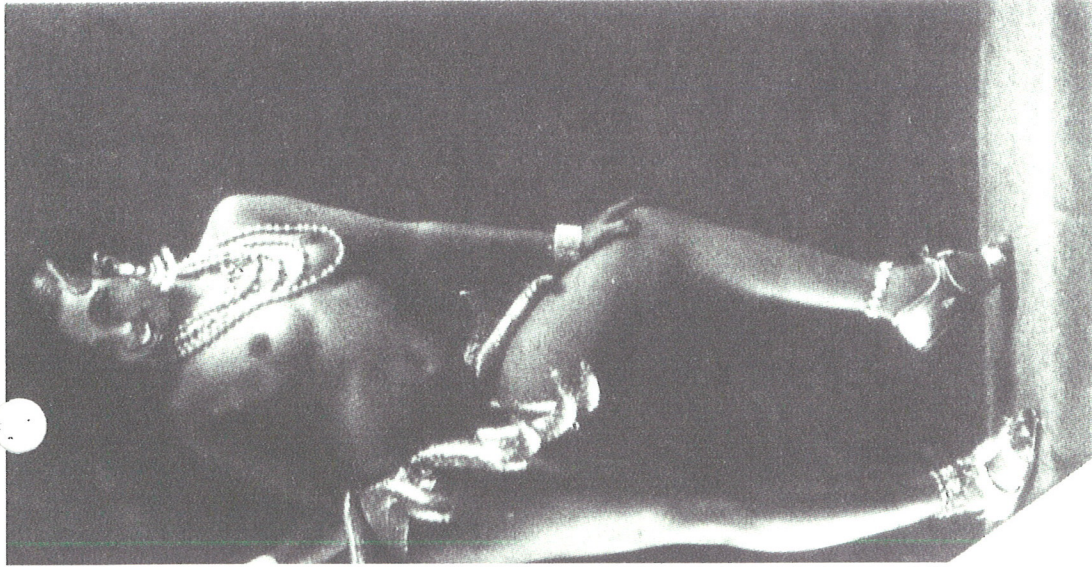


Although Billingsley catered to Winchell, Jolson, Berlin and other Jews, in private he was “casually anti-semitic” and embraced many of the other social bigotries of the era that informed the manner in which he managed the club. The few blacks who were admitted were usually led to The Blessed Events Room, reserved for private parties.

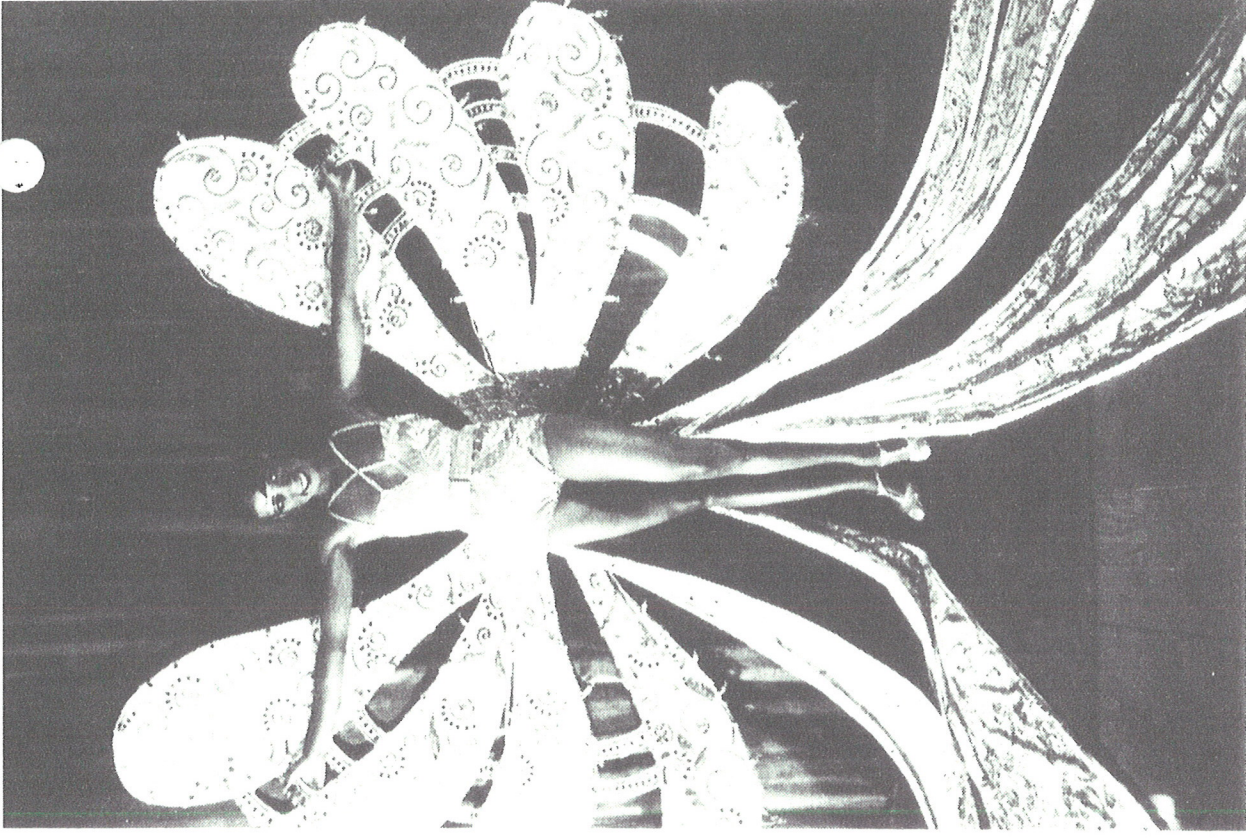
The final curtain started falling at the Stork Club when its prescription of exclusivity began to reveal its dark side effects. The scene began in the Cub Room (often called the “Snub Room”) on October 16, 1951. Its star performer was the black singer/dancer Josephine Baker. While the organized civil rights movement was years off, this episode smacked of Sarajevo and Fort Sumter for a war that would ultimately follow.

Baker was the illegitimate daughter of an amateur actress who weaned Josephine on the hot music of the Tenderloin District of St. Louis. Josephine married at thirteen, and then at fifteen, traveled the black vaudeville circuit. Her comic talents eventually took her to New York where she was invited to join a black troupe touring France. An exotic and bawdy figure in Paris, she caused a sensation in La Folie du Jour when she danced the Charleston garbed only in three bracelets and a girdle of bananas. She opened her own club – Chez Josephine – and became one of the most popular entertainers in France and a symbol of sexuality and fun. Moreover, she was seen as a heroine to French women as they staged a cultural revolt in the 1920’s. The women of Paris wanted her look.

Her enthusiastic adoption of French citizenship was tied in her mind to French racial tolerance. “In WWII, a very small percentage – one historian puts it at 2 per cent – took part in the resistance called for by General de Gaulle. Baker was among them. Her heroism was real, and her Croix de Guerre well deserved.” (Rose p.181)



The banana skirt, first worn in  
the Folies-Bergère, 1926-27.  
*Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.*



A new Josephine Baker begins  
to emerge in the  
1931-32 Casino de Paris show,  
*Paris Qui Remue.*  
*Courtesy of Mr. John Brady, Jr.*

Early in 1951, Baker returned to the United States and appeared at the Copa City in Miami, followed by performances in New York at the Strand, then at the Roxy. Once a symbol of sexual laissez-faire, Baker the grande dame, had now become a symbol of racial pride. During her Roxy appearance, the NAACP feted her at a block party in Harlem. Two days after that party, Baker arrived at the Stork Club with her husband, Jo Bouillon, and Bessie Buchanan and the male lead of *South Pacific*, Roger Rico, and his wife.

“She was led to the Cub Room, where Winchell was seated in his reserved spot at table 50. Billingsley strolled by the Cub Room entrance, saw Baker and said to a waiter, “Who ....let her in?” All service to her table was frozen for nearly an hour. Furious, Baker rose from the table with a friend to call her lawyer, Walter White, the executive secretary of the N.A.A.C.P. Winchell, apparently in innocence, said as the couple passed: “That’s nice. They’re going dancing.” Before the night was over, a huge scandal had broken over radio and in the city’s newspapers. (Hamill)

It was the beginning of the end. In the final analysis, the episode destroyed the careers of Winchell, Baker, Rico and Billingsley and, of course, the Stork Club.

Winchell who in this instance was simply an innocent bystander and one who had an almost unblemished record of challenging racial discrimination was heavily criticized for not renouncing Billingsley. For the first time, Winchell’s enemies were now able to attack him publicly. The New York Post gave extensive coverage sympathetic to Baker and later ran a series of exposes, detailing his weaknesses and petty tyranny. He wound up resigning from ABC, and, to his horror, his resignation was accepted. In the end, Winchell lamented, “She broke my heart, I am a finished man.”

Billingsley usually fawned over Roger Rico, the French star of *South Pacific*, which was breaking Broadway records but not that night. Coincidentally (or was it?) the episode was a display of *South Pacific*’s central theme: the difference between American and French attitudes toward race as expressed by the song, “You’ve Got To Be Taught.”



SHERMAN WITH DAMON RUNYON (LEFT)  
AND WALTER WINCHELL (CENTER)



MARILYN MONROE AND JOE DIMAGGIO



DESI ARNAZ AND LUCILLE BALL



ETHEL MERMAN AND IRVING BERLIN



*Ernest Hemingway and Marlene Dietrich shared Martinis and a soulful glance at the Stork Club in 1946. Hemingway liked his Martinis very cold and served with an olive. Dietrich liked men who liked Martinis.*

*Below: Harry James and Betty Grable are shown at New York's Stork Club in 1943 with a pack of Esterfield cigarettes (Harry's radio sponsor) and a bottle of Sortilege perfume, in which company Stork Club owner Sherman Billingsley had an interest. (Ken Whitten Collection)*



You've got to be taught to be afraid  
Of people whose eyes are oddly made  
And people whose skin is a different shade  
You've got to be carefully taught.

Rico became the first victim of the dispute. The producers of *South Pacific*, complaining they were receiving bomb threats, insisted on buying him out of his contract, further stipulating that he leave the country to minimize the publicity.

The argument continued to rage between Winchell and Baker, each resorting to half-truths and some distortions about each other's character. Ultimately, Baker lost also as she went too far with her accusations. Her insistence on French superiority alienated even some of her own race (including Louis Armstrong, Adam Clayton Powell and Edith Sampson). Although still somewhat of a heroine in the race struggle, Baker damaged her career. On the verge of making it big in America, she lost all of her American bookings and the opportunity for making money that she badly needed. Having read several accounts of the Stork Club affair, I am of the opinion that Baker (with help, e.g. Bessie Buchanan) purposely staged it. For this, she paid a price.

The Baker affair only compounded both Billingsley's and the Stork Club's developing difficulties. Television had begun to keep people home, and the G.I. Bill was democratizing American society to the extent that the subculture of cafe society began to appear anachronistic. There was a non-union picket line led by prominent blacks calling attention to Billingsley's bigotry and discrimination. Soon, this was followed by union picketing and a disastrous strike that went on for years, as employees grew disenchanted with his "crude and dictatorial ways." Directives to employees were signed S.B. but left enough room so that employees would scribble an O in the middle. He was consistently threatened by hate mail.



In 1956, the Stork Club lost money and struggled thereafter. It closed in 1965. Billingsley died broke.

To me, more than to its chroniclers, the Stork Club was greater than its nefarious proprietor. Having been admitted to the mystique and mystery of America's most enchanting nightclub, I still mourn its demise. There was no golden rope preventing me from returning to Des Moines.

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