The defining event of the 1960s for the Regal Theater was its shift to Black ownership. This shift symbolized the possibility that Bronzeville Blacks could retain and control desirable businesses in their own community. Ownership of the Regal Theater and the commercial complex of which it was a part did not represent a business opportunity that Whites had ignored. Ownership of the Regal had been a coveted and lucrative endeavor for thirty-five years. Blacks had always served as a theatrical workforce, whose cultural products formed the foundation of American popular culture. However, ownership of major institutions to exhibit and profit from those products was always elusive to African Americans. There were a few exceptions, of course, though small and short-lived.

Moreover, S. B. Fuller, the Regal’s owner to be, was making a name for himself. He seemed to embody the idea that Blacks could become major players in the business world. Fuller’s achievements appeared even more significant in the midst of the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Consciousness movements. Acquiring ownership, which meant the possibility of self-determination, fit the aspirations of a Black community that was circumscribed by multiple and profound levels of inequality, some visible, some invisible. After all, much of Bronzeville was absentee owned and, most certainly, absentee controlled by White power-brokers. Blacks were powerless to develop Bronzeville or determine its destiny. Indeed, in an earlier period Blacks struggled against Whites who wanted to keep them out of this community. Blacks also confronted White business owners who would not hire them, even though these White-owned businesses existed in the Black Belt and depended on a Black clientele. The struggle for survival, acceptance, equality, ownership, and transcendence was the history of Chicago’s Bronzeville, as it was for similar Black communities across the country.

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Thus, Black entrepreneurs routinely looked for ways to gain significant ownership of their communities, but as long as large amounts of money were to be made, White power brokers would have none of this. The takeover of policy gambling in Bronzeville was, perhaps, the best example. S. B. Fuller, many thought, was on a different path. Unfortunately, Fuller had only caught a brief wave of prosperity and was sitting atop an ocean of social and economic forces that he and other Black entrepreneurs had not seen before. Fuller did not understand why White power-brokers were willing to give up control of the Regal Theater at this historical moment in time. This chapter examines the Regal’s transition to Black ownership and its closing, while chronicling the Regal’s continuing role as a remarkable outlet for Black popular culture.

The Pre-Fuller and Fuller Eras

The life of the Regal in the 1960s is divided into two periods, before S. B. Fuller (1960–1963) and the Fuller era (1963–1968). From 1960 to 1963, the Regal Theater experienced a rebirth. Moreover, 1960 was the first full year after Regal owners had severed their ties with ABC-Paramount-Balaban and Katz and became guided by new, independent management. Regal owners invested in remodeling parts of the Theater and in improving the commercial district that surrounded the structure. Management expressed a strong commitment to the stage-show tradition and produced eighteen weeklong productions in 1960. This was one of the highest numbers of weeklong stage shows since the Regal opened in 1928. Subsequently, in 1961, stage presentations at the Regal declined to thirteen weeklong shows and one two-day show, but rose again to fifteen weeklong shows in 1962. Stage presentations declined again to eleven weeklong shows in 1963. Nonetheless, annual double-digit stage shows were impressive.

Late in 1963, Samuel B. Fuller purchased the commercial complex that housed the Regal. During the next several years, 1964, 1965, and 1966, the Regal produced fifteen, fourteen, and fifteen shows respectively that were weeklong or longer. Nineteen sixty-seven was a down year with only five weeklong shows. Nineteen sixty-eight was the final year of operation at the Regal. There were fourteen stage-show productions, but collectively they only totaled about eight-and-one-half weeks of performances. Indicative of troubled times, stage-show presentations at the Regal in 1968 routinely deviated from the traditional seven-day format and Friday start date.