Houston History

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Listen to the Music

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UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON
CENTER FOR PUBLIC HISTORY

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Classical Music In Houston

The Houston region has a long musical tradition with diverse styles ranging from country to zydeco to blues to rock and roll to gospel—and everything in between. Our current issue captures many parts of this musical heritage, with the important exception of classical music. Indeed, it barely mentions Hank Williams and has nothing to say about George Jones, one of the most famous of our region's country singers.

Hank Williams is the Beethoven of the southern United States, home to generations of country boys who ordered store-bought guitars from the Sears catalogue and picked out tunes while listening to the Grand Ole Opry. Williams escaped poverty with mournful songs about loving and cheating and drinking. He toured the South by car, playing in honky tonks while circling back on weekends to perform at the Louisiana Hayride in Shreveport or the Opry in Nashville. When he died of hard living on New Year's Day of 1953 at the ripe old age of twenty-nine, he left a legacy of classic country songs and a legend of a rich little poor boy struggling to cope with fame and fortune.

Woodrow Wilson Pratt with his Sears guitar.

George Jones followed the lead of Hank Williams, who was eight years his senior. Jones was born and raised in small towns and rural communities outside Beaumont. Like Hank, George rose from rural poverty to country music stardom. One of eight children in a family of singers, he played for pocket change on the street corners of Beaumont as an adolescent. He married at eighteen and divorced at nineteen; in the divorce papers his wife noted that he was "a man of violent temper" who was "addicted to the drinking of alcoholic beverages," two traits he shared with his father.

Early in his career, Jones worked briefly with Hank Williams, who became his hero and role model because of the "way he delivered songs." Although Jones was no match for Williams as a songwriter, his soaring voice allowed him to sing each song with great feeling. Frank Sinatra once called Jones the second best singer in America, and country and pop music fans showed their agreement by buying his records. From his early twenties into his fifties, Jones built a formidable songbook while also exploring the depths of alcohol and drug addiction. His fans remained loyal even after he earned the nickname "no show Jones"; they excused frequent binges and missed shows as the price paid for the depth of feeling in his voice. One of his best ballads, "Choices," is an apology to those he hurt along the way: "I was tempted; from an early age I found I liked drinkin', and I never turned it down. There were loved ones, but I turned them all away, livin' and dyin' with the choices I made." Country singer Moe Bandy's great song,' "Hank Williams, You Wrote My Life," could have been written for Jones.

Yet Jones lived well past the twenty-nine years of Hank Williams. In his fifties, this "good-timing man" took a "good-hearted woman" for his wife, and she helped him settle down and live to the age of eighty-one. Despite bumps along the way, he continued to tour until his death. In his last decades as a performer, he had trouble finding either songs or the strength of voice to cut through the clutter that is modern country music, but his death in the spring of 2013 brought an outpouring of praise by those who remembered the power of his voice in his prime.

County music taught its young listeners about true love, and our spouses have been trying to reeducate us for the rest of our lives. It also taught us important lessons about the flexibility and creativity of the English language. We absorbed lyrics such as "No more lookin', I know I been tooken" and "Ain't had no lovin' like a huggin' and a kissin' in a long, long while." Our junior high teachers tried in vain to teach us the difference between southern English and real English, but what did they know about the poetry of Hank Williams? Some of us have lived our lives to a soundtrack of Hank, George, Merle Haggard, Willie Nelson, and Johnny Cash. My old ears tell me that we could have done worse than classical music.[1]

THANK YOU

Houston History wishes to thank Bart Truxillo and Dewayne Ross at the Magnolia Ballroom and Saint Arnold Brewing Company for sponsoring the launch party for the summer digital issue, "A Patchwork of Our Past." Everyone enjoyed seeing this iconic historic structure while sipping a cold Saint Arnold Green Icon Amarillo Hefe beer and watching the short films highlighting the magazine articles. The staff is grateful to our board members Anne Sloan and Betty Chapman who graciously provided additional refreshments.

Photo courtesy of Jim Skogsberg.

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EDITORIAL POLICY

Houston History is published three times a year by the Houston History Project in the Center for Public History at the University of Houston. We welcome manuscripts, interviews, and photographic essays on the history and culture of the Houston region, broadly defined, as well as ideas for topical issues. All correspondence should be sent to *Houston History,* University of Houston, Center for Public History, 337 McElhinney Hall, Houston, TX 77204-3007 (713-743-3123), or emailed to: *HoustonHistory@uh.edu.*

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Cover Photo: *Shown clockwise: Jewel Brown at age fifteen, courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library; Johnny Cash and Paul Berlin, courtesy of Paul Berlin; and Shep Fields Orchestra at the Emerald Room in the Shamrock Hotel, courtesy of Ricky Diaz. Background photo shows a portion of the CDs for Pe-Te's Cajun Bandstand, courtesy of Debbie Z. Harwell.*

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On a packed night at the Pan-America, patrons of various ages enjoy live music played by Mexican and Mexican American bands.
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Desde Conjunto to Chingo Bling: Mexican American Music and Musicians in Houston

By Natalie Garza

Feet start tapping and people are drawn to the dance floor by the upbeat polka sound of the accordion and the *bajo sexto* keeping rhythm. Men wearing tailored suits lead women in strappy sandals or black heels as the mid-calf hemlines of their dresses flow with every spin. In the midst of the music, crowds are heard chatting at their tables seamlessly transitioning between English and Spanish, and as if part of the ambient sound, the clanking of beer bottles carried by thirsty patrons fills the air. In 1930s Houston, Mexican Americans enjoyed this vibrant atmosphere on any given weekend. Over the last nine decades, the Mexican American music scene in Houston has benefitted from locally grown talent that meets the cultural and entertainment needs of its community by integrating a variety of musical stylings and genres.

The 1930s witnessed a boom of Mexican American musicians in Houston dominated by two forms of music, the *conjunto* and *orquesta Tejana*. This regionally grown music became known collectively as *música Tejana*, defined by historian Guadalupe San Miguel Jr. as all the musical forms and styles listened to by Tejanos since the nineteenth century, rather than a single genre.[1] One of the most recog-

nizable identifiers of the conjunto is the use of the bajo sexto and accordion. The conjunto was connected with working-class Mexican Americans and comprised of musical styles such as the *corrido* and *canción ranchera* associated with an agrarian past. Upwardly mobile and middle-class Mexicans listened to orquesta music, characterized by big band instrumentation and a broader range of Latin American music like salsas, mambos, and boleros as well as Americanized music of the swing and fox trot. As Mexican Americans became consumers of popular American music, they began to create and perform new styles that connected new generations to a Mexican cultural past.

Alonzo y Sus Rancheros featured Ventura Alonzo playing the accordion and her husband Frank playing the guitar.
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Early groups that catered to a Mexican American audience consisted of all-male brass bands such as those formed by the Magnolia Park Benito Juárez Society, Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, and the band of Antonio Bañuelos. For the most part, men dominated Mexican American musical entertainment, but Lydia Mendoza emerged as one of the few exceptions. As a solo artist, she introduced themes specific to a woman's experience. For example, in Mendoza's signature song "Mal Hombre," she sings about a treacherous man, in contrast to most rancheras of love loss, which relate the story of a woman who betrays her man.[2]

Lydia Mendoza was born on May 21, 1916, in the Houston Heights where her parents settled after fleeing the Mexican Revolution. She became known as *La Alondra de la Frontera* (the Meadowlark of the Border) and *La Cancionera de los Pobres* (The Songstress of the Poor) because she sang in the style popular with the working class, including corridos, rancheras, waltzes, boleros, and polkas. Like many other Houston area Mexican American musicians, Lydia Mendoza grew up in a musical household with both parents playing guitar and singing. She began playing the guitar at age seven alongside her brothers and sisters who all played different instruments. The family traveled and performed in a band called Cuarteto Carta Blanca. While performing in San Antonio in 1933, Mendoza gained recognition from a radio announcer, leading to her recording two solo albums.

The dance floor at the Pan-America saw a lot of traffic with men dressed in their finest suits and women sporting the day's latest fashion. Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Mendoza married Juan Alvarado on March 3, 1935, and after taking a hiatus from music to raise her three daughters, she returned to touring and recording in 1947 and gained a new generation of fans. Mendoza sang at President Jimmy Carter's inauguration in 1977 and became the first Texan to receive a National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship in 1982. In 1999, she received the National Medal of Arts at a ceremony at the White House.[3] Lydia Mendoza died on December 20, 2007, and remains a source of pride in Mexican American musical culture in Houston.

The dynamic Houston big band scene that emerged in the 1930s remained relevant into the 1970s. Albino Torres led one of the earliest of these bands, the Magnolia Park Orquesta. Other acts that appeared in the 1930s included Johnny Velásquez and the Rancheros, Johnny Martínez and his Orquesta, Joe Varela and the Orquesta Tejana, and Roy Salas and the Rhythm Kings. While conjunto and orquesta groups might be associated with the working and middle classes respectively, these bands understood that above all Mexican American audiences wanted to dance and catered to that demand.

The popular style of Frank and Ventura Alonzo made them a big draw in several Houston night clubs and other Texas cities including Fort Worth, Austin, and Kingsville. Frank Alonzo was born in San Antonio on January 28, 1908, and moved to Houston's Magnolia Park in 1927. In the late 1920s, Frank met Ventura Martinez who was born on December 30, 1905, in Matamoros, Mexico. Her family moved to the United States in 1910, and in 1917, Ventura moved to Houston, eventually settling in Magnolia Park. Frank and Ventura married in 1931 and began playing music together in 1935. Frank was a self-taught musician on the guitar while Ventura received lessons at the age of nine and played the accordion as an adult.

They formed the group Alonzo y Sus Rancheros that evolved into a five-person orchestra. In one of their early

performances at the Immaculate Heart of Mary church bazaar, Ventura sang publically for the first time, becoming the lead vocalist for the group. Alonzo y Sus Rancheros played boleros, cumbias, waltzes, and mambos, but were mostly known for their rancheras. Frank and Ventura retired from music in 1969, after which he played for senior citizens in Denver Harbor every Friday at the Centro Alegre community center and she taught crafts and occasionally played the piano at Ripley House.[4]

Another musical family was that of Eloy Pérez, born on December 2, 1923. Eloy grew up working on a farm in Bastrop, Texas, where he and his brothers learned to play music on their own. The family moved to Rosenberg in 1937 and then to Houston in 1944. Eloy had played music throughout and after World War II formed a group called Eloy Pérez and the Latinaires, later changed to Eloy Pérez y Sus Latinos. The new name reflected the political climate of the 1960s Chicano movement and expressed ethnic pride. Eloy Pérez toured his group across Texas and the Southwest, influencing an entire generation of Mexican American musicians. One of the region's top three Latin big band groups through the early 1960s, at its height, Pérez's orchestra featured nine or more musicians and a vocalist, including older brothers Felipe, Sixto, and Locaido. The family's next generation continued the musical tradition with Sixto's son Ernesto (Neto) Pérez forming his own popular band.[5]

The Ricky Diaz Orchestra emerged in the 1960s and catered to the middle class but also played popular dance music, which Mexican Americans enjoyed. Enrique Alberto Diaz (Ricky) was born in 1931 in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, across the border from Eagle Pass, Texas. The son of a bandleader and music professor, Diaz began playing the piano at the age of eight. After graduating high school, Diaz moved to San Antonio to play music, which led to a three-year stint playing with Beto Villa, a Tejano musician who skillfully mixed conjunto and orquesta in his musical stylings. Shep Fields's Orchestra recruited Diaz around 1954, and he traveled across the United States with them before settling in Houston where the orchestra regularly played at the Shamrock Hotel. Even

In the early 1950s, Ricky Diaz (top left) played with the Beto Villa orquesta, one of the earliest Tejano orquestras to play conjuntos as well as ballads. Photo courtesy of Ricky Diaz.

as an accomplished musician, Diaz continued to build his repertoire, taking lessons from a concert pianist after moving to Houston and developing a love for classical music. While playing with Shep Fields in the mid-1950s, Diaz began playing with and composing arrangements for Roberto Compean, house bandleader at the Houston Club. Diaz met and married Roberto's sister, Belen in 1957. He says, "from there on

Playing at the Houston Club in 1957, from left: Roberto Compean, Betty Cole, Carlos Compean, Maynard Gable, Ricky Diaz (on accordion), Freddy Compean, Joe Garza, and Jose Compean (far right). The Compeans were a well-known musical family in Houston, and Ricky became part of the family when he married Belen. Roberto, Carlos, and Freddy are Ricky's brothers-in-law, and Jose was Ricky's father-in-law.
Photo courtesy of Ricky Diaz.

Here mariachis play at La Terraza, a popular night club owned by the Alonzos in the 1950s where several Mexican American bands entertained. Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

we became a musical family and ever since then I've been working in the music business."[6]

In 1963, Diaz formed his own fifteen-piece band, and five years later, the family moved to Los Angeles where Belen sang vocals. Ricky gained some notoriety in the larger California music market but opted to return to Houston because he believed it offered better stability for his family. Throughout his career, Diaz played for such celebrities as Judy Garland, Bob Hope, The Platters, Frank Sinatra, and for Presidents John F. Kennedy, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton. A talented musician and composer, Diaz continues to play events in the Houston region.

During this era of big band music, Houston's Mexican Americans created a variety of cultural spaces for entertainment. Houston area musicians played at church festivals, weddings, community benefits, hotels, ballrooms, and dance halls. The Pan-America Ballroom served as an important music and social venue for the Mexican American community during the 1960s and 1970s. Former Magnolia Park resident Juan Torres explains, "I used to go a lot to the Pan-America…It was located on Main Street. The older people went on Fridays and Saturdays for the dances, then the younger people went on Sunday afternoon for the matinee. It was mostly eighteen or nineteen [year olds] that went there." The teen matinee drew Mexican American youth from Magnolia Park, Northside, Sixth Ward, and Second Ward. Torres recalls, "We were from different parts of town…the ones from Magnolia stuck together and the ones from Northside stuck together." Crowds at the Pan-America overflowed the 2,500 capacity limit for big shows on the weekends. The building that once housed the Pan-America lies vacant, but many Mexican Americans have memories of this important cultural space.[7]

In addition to having a band, some musicians opened up their own club or ballroom. Two examples of this include La Terraza Nite Club and The Stardust Ballroom. Torres remembers, "besides the tortilleria, [my dad] was part owner of La Terraza Nite Club on McCarty. His partners were Frank Alonzo, who had the band Frank Alonzo y Sus Rancheros, and Chema, my cousin Jose Maria Lombrano, was also a partner and they had it for five years." La Terraza opened in 1956 and featured such musicians as Eloy Pérez, Flaco Jimenez, Los Aguilares, and Henry Zimmerle. Formerly the Fulton Theater, The Stardust Ballroom opened in 1969. Juan Torres talks about The Stardust that was owned by Neto Pérez, who had a Tejano band, "I met my wife at the Stardust. She kind of liked the way I dance so she tripped me [to get my attention]."[8]

Some of the other well-known venues included the American Legion Hall on 75th Street, Union Hall on Houston Avenue, The Acapulco on Washington Avenue, El Tropical on Main Street, The Log Cabin on Old Galveston Road, Salon Juarez on Navigation, The Azteca Theater on Congress Street, The Palladium on South Main, The Blossom Heath, and The Starlight on Market Street.

Going out to a dance, regardless of location, was an event. As Torres recalls, "We dressed real nice; me and my guys we went to Duke's Tailors downtown and bought tailor made pants and shirts. Everybody, even the girls were dressed to kill. We dressed up real good."[9]

In the 1980s and 1990s, some Mexican American musicians began incorporating a broader range of popular American music. La Mafia, founded in the 1980s by Oscar De La Rosa and Armando Lichtenberger Jr. from North Houston, introduced a new style to música Tejana characterized by a synthesizer and keyboard. Recognized for their willingness to blend rock, folk, reggae, and pop with traditional Latin music, La Mafia is innovative among Tejano groups, touring regionally, nationwide, and throughout Mexico and Latin America. They won two Grammys and two Latin Grammys and received nine additional nominations.[10]

Singing both in English and Spanish, Norma Zenteno was another local performer known for her musical fusion of Latin, jazz, rock, and pop. According to her website, Zenteno received her first electric guitar at the age

Tejano music group and Grammy winner La Mafia originated in Houston. Photo courtesy of Miller Outdoor Theatre.

of eleven from her father, trumpet player and local band leader, Roberto Zenteno. Roberto was from Monterrey, Nuevo León, and arrived in Houston in the mid-1950s with his wife Elsa. He lost his arm in an accident when he was younger, but learned to play the trumpet and later started the Roberto Zenteno Band performing in nightclubs such as Ram's Club, Castille Club, Club Latino, Rio Posada at Allen's Landing, Las Haciendas Los Morales, and Sambucca Jazz Café.[11] It was at this last venue where I was first introduced to the music of Norma Zenteno. Norma and her band regularly played at Sambucca's on Thursday nights with great music, energy, and dancing. Having just moved to Houston from the East Coast, it was exciting to experience a Latin music scene that included a mix of the music I grew up with in San Antonio and the salsa music I had grown to love. Sadly, on February 22, 2013, Norma Zenteno died of complications from breast cancer at the age of sixty.

In 1990, sisters Melinda Hernandez and Patricia Lynn Hernandez who grew up in a musical family in Magnolia Park formed the group Sister Sister. Melinda gained experience in the music industry after traveling with the legendary Tejano singer Little Joe from 1983 to 1986, as the only female vocalist. During this time she began writing and composing her own music. The band's Facebook page describes its music as indie, Latin, and pop fusion, and its style has been compared to that of Linda Ronstandt. In 2000, the band grew after recruiting Nancy "Thibideaux" Saenz, from North Houston, along with brothers and uncles to create the group Sister Sister y los Misters. The group's first CD, titled *Little bit of Texas, Little bit of Mexico*, was nominated for a Grammy. Melinda said she started learning music at Edison Junior High, mentored by Charles Rodríguez, the brother of Judge Armando Rodríguez. "Most of the [local] musicians, or many of the musicians that are playing now were taught by my brother," Judge Rodríguez recalls.[12]

Another popular local group, Los Skarnales formed in the 1990s. Founded originally as punk band Desorden by Felipe Galvan and Jose Rodríguez, the band performs a mixture of ska, reggae, rockabilly, swing, mambo, cumbia, and danzones. Los Skarnales gained a following in Mexico and the United States, and play locally at Fitzgerald's and Free Press Summer Festival.

Like Mexican American youth of the past who listened to swing, rock-and-roll, disco, and pop, today's Mexican American youth have also adopted the mainstream popular culture, and in Houston that means hip hop. The música Tejana of the past still remains relevant with many young Mexican Americans. Assistant professor of Mexican American Studies, and native Houstonian, Marco Antonio Cervantes wrote, "When I step out and drive into my mixed Black and Chicana/o 'Mail Route' neighborhood, I hear Tejano, banda, norteño and the slowed down, syncopated rhythms of chopped and screwed rap music blasting from car systems."[13] One of the most skilled rappers representing this amalgamated culture and sound is Houstonian Chingo Bling.

Born Pablo Herrera to Mexican parents who migrated to Houston from Valle Hermoso, Tamaulipas, Chingo Bling's music, style, and message is a mix of Black and Chicano Houston street culture. Bling attended a private high school in New Jersey and later majored in business administration marketing at Trinity University in San Antonio where he originated his Chingo Bling stage persona as a disc jockey for the student radio station. His rap songs are in English and Spanish often in the same line, and his presentation ranges between parody and political. As expressed in the song "Brown and Proud," Chingo Bling raps, "Even though I do the funny shit, don't get it twisted, all my songs got a message, so don't miss it." Bling's fashion is also a mix of cultural forms, wearing a black cowboy hat and ostrich skin boots paying homage to norteño/ranchero/Tejano style but also sports baggy calf-length shorts or baggy jeans, a Nike swoosh on his ostrich boots, a blinged out cowboy boot necklace, and a grill.[14] In the song "Ostrich Boots," Bling raps, "R.I.P. Selena, DJ Screw in the same ride," indicating that for Mexican American youth two regionally-grown musical forms hold equal importance: música Tejana and Houston rap.

Other Houston Chicano rappers include South Park Mexican, Grimm, Baby Bash, Juan Gotti, and Lucky Luciano. Many of these rappers record and perform screwed music, a slowed tempo sound with dropped pitch, which originated in Houston with African American artist, DJ Screw. While their style is screwed, these rappers make local references recognizable to the Mexican American community, and utilize culturally relevant language and themes in their songs.

From the conjunto and orquesta music of the 1930s and the Tejano and fusion music of the 1980s and 1990s to the hip hop music of today, Mexican Americans in Houston have contributed greatly to the music culture and continue to evolve the Mexican American sound.

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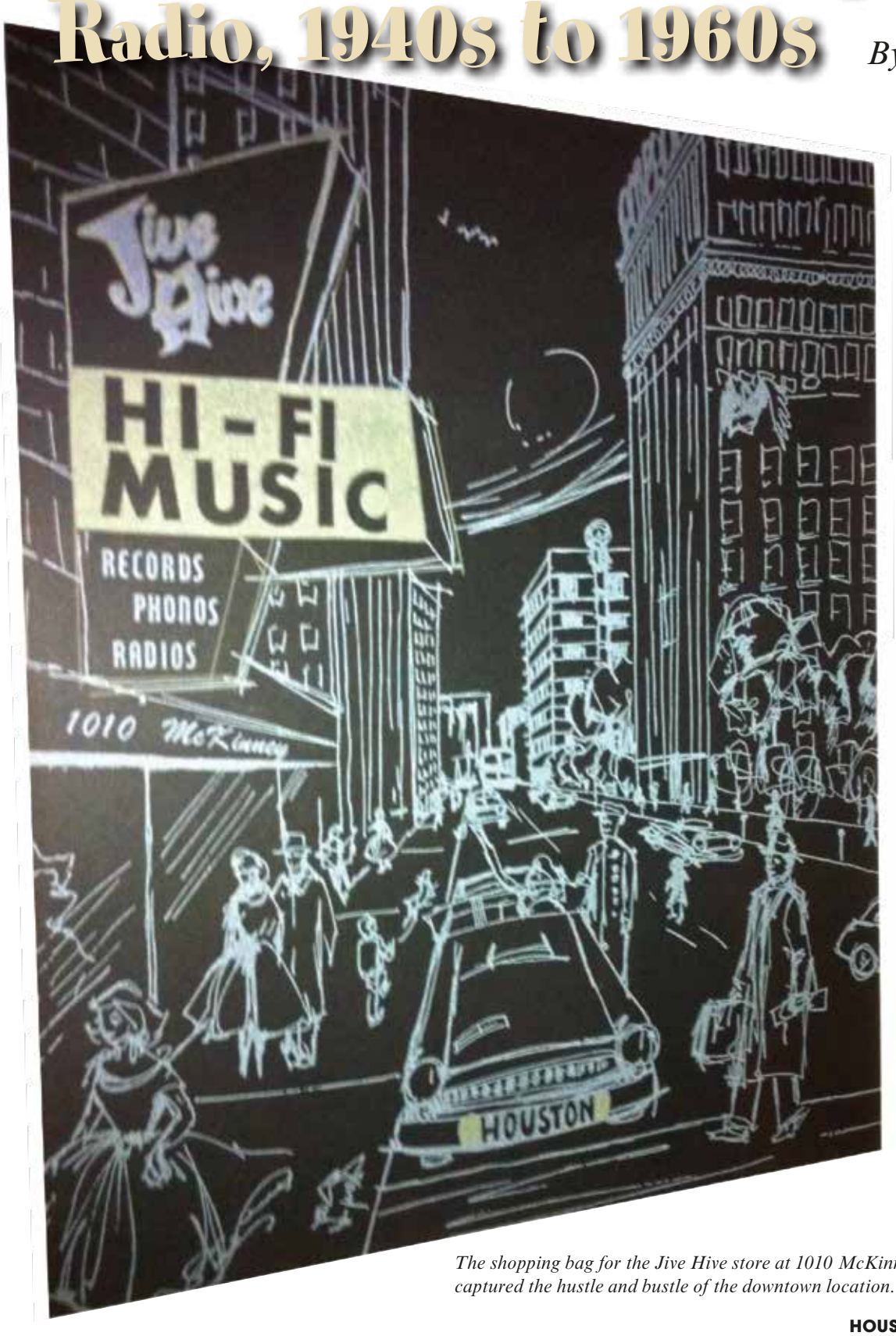
Rockin' and Boppin': Houston's Record Shops and Radio, 1940s to 1960s

By Debbie Z. Harwell



The shopping bag for the Jive Hive store at 1010 McKinney right off Main Street captured the hustle and bustle of the downtown location. Photo courtesy of author.

My newlywed parents came to Houston at the end of World War II with $150 to open a record shop. A former railroad employee, my dad, Frank Zerjav, hailed from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and had served as a master sergeant in the Air Force; my mother, Irene Freeman, created department store ads before going to work for a colonel at Goodfellow Field in San Angelo. They fell in love driving around the base listening to their song, Bob Wills's "New San Antonio Rose," and other Texas swing hits.[1] I suppose that made getting into the record business a logical choice after they married—he had experience in purchasing, she had experience in sales, and they loved music and people. Two of my mother's sisters already owned businesses in Houston—Baker's Beauty Supply and Barbour's Opticians—so my parents, like many who flocked here after the war, felt confident the city offered them a shot at the American dream.

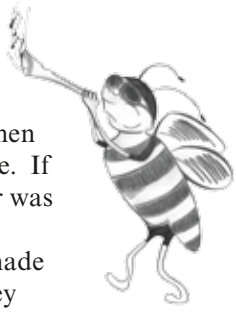
They found a spot at 2053 West Alabama at Shepherd, in between a liquor store and Burger Bar, catty-corner across the street from the

The original Jive Hive stood between Burger Barn and a liquor store facing the corner of Alabama and Shepherd, the Alabama Theater, a Walgreen's, and A&P grocery store. Images of bee hives and bees playing various instruments decorated the interior.
Photo courtesy of author.

Alabama Theater. Opening in December 1945, they called their place the Jive Hive and sold Christmas trees in the parking lot to help make ends meet. Before long, the business grew with their reputation for customer service and carrying the latest hits. In 1948, my dad took advantage of the G.I. Bill and enrolled in classes at the University of Houston where he learned to repair radios and record players to expand their services. In 1952, I was born and took up residence in a playpen in the back of the shop—that is until I learned to remove the slats and toddle to the front where I gained an appreciation for all kinds of music from Offenbach's *Gaîté Parisienne* to "Hound Dog" (1956) and "The Chipmunk Song" (1958). It was a happy time.

True to its name, the Jive Hive buzzed with activity. Irene's sister, Joy Gould, remembers the place was always full of young people who loved the atmosphere because "everything was lively." As with most record shops around town, a customer could come in with friends and sit down at a turntable to play a 45-rpm single or a whole album

Frank and Irene Zerjav with daughter Debbie standing behind the counter at the original Jive Hive location, circa 1955.
Photo courtesy of author.



to make sure they liked it before making a purchase. My parents kept track of their customers' musical preferences and contacted them when something new came in they might like. If the shop did not have what a customer was looking for, my mother would find it.[2]

This type of personalized service made these people more than customers, they became friends and, in some cases, like family. Houston attorney Jimmy Brill recalls that Irene became his "second mother," and he often hung out at the store with his friends during his high school days at Lamar, "I would go in and start grooving and I was there for the day." While a student at The University of Texas, his first stop on visits home was the Jive Hive.[3]

Brill also remembers the importance of radio in promoting music and hanging out at Top-40 station KNUZ-AM at the corner of Caroline and Blodgett, where Paul Berlin began his Houston career. The radio legend's first on-air appearance came after he won a high school contest for a summer DJ job in his hometown of Memphis, Tennessee, in 1948. When the program director asked if Berlin liked radio, he replied, "How could you not like sitting down for one hour a day playing your favorite music and dedicating it to your hoodlum buddies who are all out there listening?" He loved it, and the station offered him a regular job for $55 a week. But one night in 1950, he fell asleep working

Capitol Records distributor for Houston, Patt Quinn and Nat King Cole with Paul Berlin at the Music Hall in the late 1950s.
Photo courtesy of Paul Berlin.

the graveyard shift. His boss had to let him go but referred him to Dave Morris at KNUZ who liked what he heard on the audition tape and hired Berlin.[4] Memphis's loss was Houston's gain.

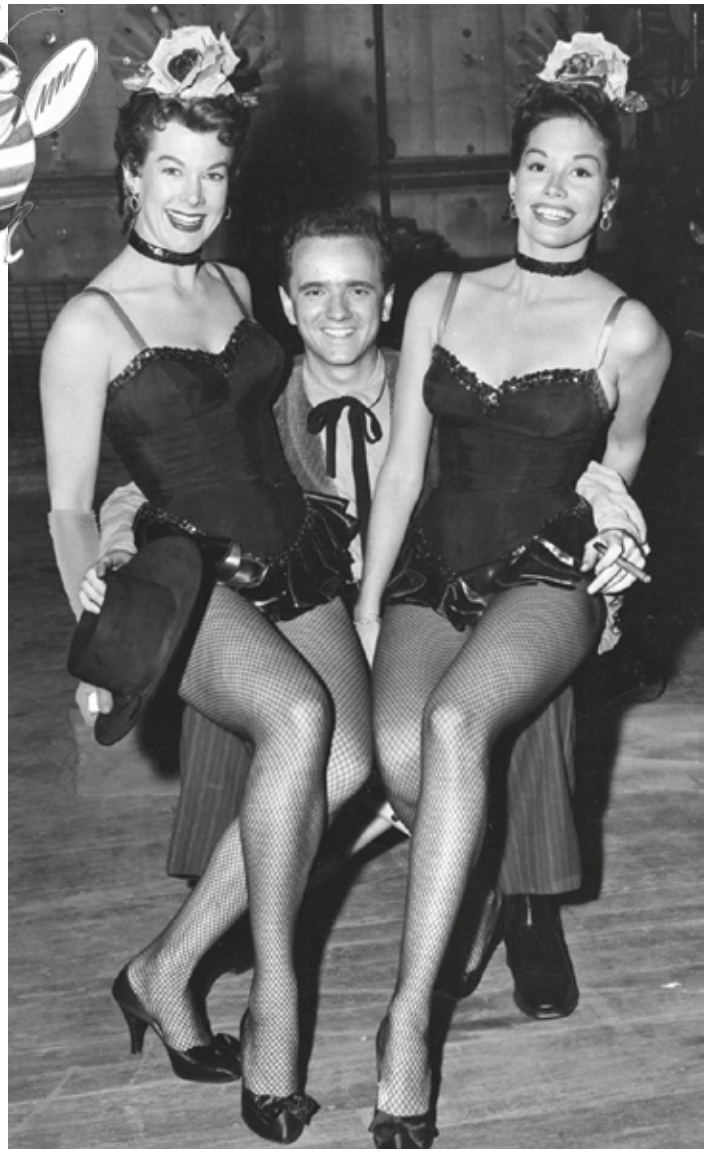
Berlin remembers how music trends shifted in the post-war era locally and nationally. In the 1940s, big bands

ruled, but dancing and ballrooms like Houston's Plantation Ballroom lost popularity when people began staying home to watch television. Vocalists like Sarah Vaughn, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Peggy Lee, Vic Damone, and Doris Day, many of whom also had movie careers, took their place. In the 1950s, rhythm and blues hit it big with Chuck Berry's "Maybellene," Fats Domino's "Boogie Woogie Baby," and The Drifters' "Money Honey." By doing something different with a rhythm and a beat, they quickly replaced the vocal artists. No other decade, Berlin says, had the variety of music heard in the 1950s.[5]

With records a popular source of entertainment, the changing trends led to the success of radio stations and record shops, all of which worked closely with distributors like Houston's Pat Quinn of national distributor Columbia Records and local producer Howard "Pappy" Daily of Starday Records. In addition to the Jive Hive, other popular Houston record shops included Paul Berlin's Record Room, Don's Record Shop, Avalon Records, and Talley's.

Other than entertaining radio audiences, Berlin brought named performers to Houston. Early on, he booked big bands like those led by Tommy Dorsey, Artie Shaw, and Jimmy Dorsey at the Plantation Ballroom as well as country acts like Bob Wills, Hank Williams, and Ernest Tubb. He brought rock and roll and rhythm and blues acts like Brook Benton, The Platters, The Drifters, and LaVern Baker to the City Auditorium. Although much of Houston remained segregated, Berlin was the first to offer African Americans a chance to sit in front-row seats, rather than relegating them to the balcony, by dividing the sections left and right at rhythm and blues concerts.[6]

The Jive Hive promoted all of the day's favorite performers. My dad received a gracious thank you note from Doris Day for supporting her career, and they met notables like Perry Como. Houstonian Kenny Rogers came into the shop frequently during his early career, and my parents were thrilled when he later hit it big with the First Edition. Like many music-lovers, however, my mother's favorite was Elvis Presley. In fact, besides giving birth, her proudest moment



Paul Berlin poses with Mary Tyler Moore, right, and an unknown dancer. The two women appeared as uncredited dance hall girls in the 1958 movie Once Upon a Horse … *featuring Dan Rowan and Dick Martin.* Photo courtesy of Paul Berlin.

In 1954 and 1955, Elvis Presley, shown here with Paul Berlin, made numerous appearances at the Municipal Auditorium, Magnolia Gardens, and Cook's Hoedown Club among other places in Houston. Photo courtesy of Paul Berlin.

was being one of the first in town to sell Elvis records and meeting him during one of his many trips to Houston in the mid-1950s. A perk for being a loyal supporter also meant they attended private showings of Elvis's early movies, *Love Me Tender* (1956) and *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), with me in tow.

Elvis's first hit single on Sun Records was "That's Alright Mama" and "Blue Moon of Kentucky." He revolutionized the industry with a combination of his bluesy-style and hip-gyrating performances. Berlin met Elvis many times in 1954 and 1955. Elvis played the Grand Prize (Beer) Jamboree with guitarist Scotty Moore and bass guitarist Bill Black and then appeared at the Magnolia Garden. The trio received a total of $300 for both shows. Berlin recalls, "He could sing!" Nevertheless, Berlin points out that Elvis did not write his own music and that, as his movie career took off, his promoters encouraged him to fill soundtracks with seven or eight songs, many of which Elvis later regretted recording. By contrast, Hank Williams composed about "ninety percent" of his songs. "His lyrics said something

Paul Berlin brought Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gorme to Houston's Arena Theater. He considers the couple some of the nicest people he ever met and mourns the passing of Gorme who died August 10, 2013. Photo courtesy of Paul Berlin.

Bee drawings by Aaron Goffney.

and meant something," Berlin explains. Then quoting one of Williams's hits, he adds, "'Today I passed you on the street and my heart fell at your feet. I can't help it if I'm still in love with you.' Now that's a great line!"[7]

Disc jockeys had a big impact on record sales and had to be smart enough to pick a winner from a loser. "When you get a stack of new records (which we used to do) you've got to go through them and decide which ones do I play?" Berlin explains, "You don't play them all. It's like shopping for a new suit. You don't try on all the suits. You look at them and the ones with eye appeal are the ones you grab. You listen to a record, and the ones with ear appeal, those are the ones you put aside [to play]." Lyrics were his first criteria; he wanted to understand what the person was singing. Then he judged the reaction of his listeners. The DJ who was right most of the time had influence, but that person also had to be willing to admit it when he missed one another DJ introduced to radio audiences.[8]

Many people may remember, "Hellooooo, Baaaaby," as the opening line of "Chantilly Lace" by the Big Bopper, J. P. Richardson of Beaumont. A disc jockey himself, he contacted Berlin and asked him to listen to the song, which he had recorded on Daily's "D" record label. Berlin promised he would listen to it like he would a new Elvis record but not necessarily play it. Richardson said that was all he asked. A few weeks later, Berlin toured American Army bases in Western Europe with nine other top DJs from around the country. Each brought the hottest record from his hometown to play for the troops, and Berlin chose "Chantilly Lace." "None of these other guys had ever heard it," he recalls; and "Once the G.I.s heard me playing that 'Hello, Baby!' . . . I got more reaction with 'Chantilly Lace' than anything they brought." The DJs wanted to know who the singer was and where to get the record so they could play it in their markets.

In 1957, my parents sold the Alabama and Shepherd store to John and Helen Flintjer, who changed its name to the Record Rack. The new Jive Hive opened downtown at 1010 McKinney just off Main Street, half a block from Woolworth's and around the corner from Neiman-Marcus and the Lowes and Metropolitan Theaters. Besides being larger, the new store had custom made racks to display the records and private booths for customers to listen to music. Light blue velvet with peach accents covered the walls and futuristic brass light fixtures with tiny stars hung from the ceiling. My parents enjoyed two very successful years before progress took their building. In 1959, First City National Bank bought the block that included their store to construct a new high-rise, now One City Center, and the Jive Hive was no more. My dad, who liked the idea of a steady paycheck, took a job as a purchasing agent for an engineering company; and my mother, who liked being her own boss, started Copy Cat Printing.

Musical trends changed again in the 1960s. The British invasion swept the nation, most notably, The Beatles, who came to Houston in 1965. (Tickets for the show at the Coliseum cost five dollars!) Berlin acknowledges the contributions of The Beatles songs like "Yesterday" and "Something" to the period's music, but he found most of the later sixties' music negatively influenced by dope. "Marijuana became as common as Hershey bars and then psychedelics, the 'fly me to the moon' era . . . the music was so loud you couldn't stand to be in the room with it, and it didn't make any sense musically," he recalls.[9] I have often reflected that it was a good thing my parents got out of the business when they did because they would never have tolerated the drug-culture music (let alone sold a roach clip, as many stores did), and my mother would not have liked seeing male customers with long hair and beards.

Also at this time, the record business took a turn that hurt the small independent shops. Large department stores like Foley's began selling records and, because they bought

in bulk and sold other products, they could discount the price of records to draw people into the store. The Flintjers, who bought my parents original shop, sold the Record Rack to employee Bruce Godwin in 1982. He saw music go from the disco craze to new wave and alternative music before he concentrated on "dance and club music, cutting-edge imports and specialty vinyl." Over the years, though, he had to downsize twice before finally deciding to close the store and auction it on eBay in 2002.[10]

Eventually digital music downloads eliminated the need for records, tapes, and CDs.[11] Today, the downward trend for store-bought music continues as even electronic giants like Best Buy, that started out with music and movies as a mainstay, no longer have much selection of either in stock.

Paul Berlin continued his career in radio and retired in 2004; however, after a guest appearance on Dan Patrick's show in 2010, Patrick promptly decided Berlin should return to the airwaves. Today, he has Houston's only "oldies" radio program, a Saturday evening show from 6:00-8:00 p.m. on KSEV, 700-AM. His format is "AOR" or "all over the road" because he likes all kinds of music. He plays a mix of Dixieland, big band, country, rhythm and blues, and rock and roll, pointing out, "I'm a mood guy." Of his long career, he says, "You know there were a lot of days I didn't feel like going to work, but there was never a day that I didn't want to go to work. Big difference. I always loved what I did." His formula for being happy in life is "someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to." Although Paul Berlin lost his wife of sixty-one years earlier this year, it seems he managed to find all three.[12]

Paul Berlin (right) greets Eddie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds at a cocktail party for Dan Rowan and Dick Martin's movie Once upon a Horse . . . *The Zerjavs named their daughter for Reynolds after seeing her in* Singin' in the Rain. Photo courtesy of Paul Berlin.

Paul Berlin joins music legend Ray Charles at Jones Hall. Charles played at over thirty different venues in Houston during his long career. Photo courtesy of Paul Berlin.

Today when I click on iTunes to download a forgotten oldie or a new hit, it is second nature. I then plug in my headphones or set my iPhone on a docking station to listen to music, which I have organized in playlists – like Paul Berlin – by mood. It is easy now; I no longer have to insert small plastic discs in the middle of 45 records so they can drop one at a time on my stereo, or worry about lightly placing the needle on an album to avoid scratching (and ruining) it. In the process, though, I also miss out on the experience of sharing music with my friends the way earlier generations did. The 1940s to early 1960s represented a moment in time when the era's music created a bond between music-lovers who were "rockin' and boppin'" to sounds produced on a vinyl disc spun on a turntable in a record shop, at home, or in a radio studio. No wonder people like my parents and Paul Berlin thought it was music's finest era.

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Keeping Cajun Music Alive — "Yes, siree, I guarontee ya":

A conversation with Pe-Te Johnson and Jason Theriot

Pe-Te Johnson was born in Grand Taso, near Eunice, Louisiana. His ancestors are direct descendants of the Acadians expelled from Nova Scotia in the mid-eighteenth century. His last name, Johnson, is the Anglo version of his Acadian sir name, Jeansonne. He served in the U.S. Air Force during the Korean War and was stationed in Chateauroux, France, for two and a half years, having served as an interpreter when the military opened a new base there in 1953. He did his first radio show at the V.A. hospital in Alexandria, Louisiana, in the early 1950s.

After completing his service, Pe-Te moved to Beaumont in 1959 and worked at Wyatt's Cafeteria until he transferred to Houston in 1961. Later, he became an inspector for the Arco Petrochemical Plant where he made more money selling barbeque sandwiches for lunch than his job paid. In 1979, he opened Pe-Te's Cajun BBQ House across from Ellington Field in Friendswood. The restaurant and dancehall remained a favorite of pilots, astronauts, cosmonauts, celebrities, Cajuns, and non-Cajuns alike until it closed in 2005.

Even though the restaurant kept him busy, Pe-Te accepted an offer to start a local Cajun music radio show at KTEK in 1981. Two years later the program moved to listener-supported KPFT, and this year he celebrated his thirtieth year as the host of "Pe-Te's Cajun Bandstand," which he does as a volunteer service. He has been arguably the most influential public figure in promoting Cajun and Zydeco music in the Houston region. The following excerpts are from a conversation between Jason Theriot and Pe-Te Johnson on May 30, 2009.

All photos courtesy of Pe-Te Johnson unless otherwise noted.

Pe-Te and Jennie married on January 31, 1964. She was his partner in love, in business, and in life for forty-nine years until she passed away earlier this year.

CAJUN IMMIGRATION TO TEXAS

PE-TE: I've got a first cousin, they moved over here in the late forties, in Katy, to harvest rice fields. They still live in Katy. He's in his eighties, eighty-nine, and he was in the service during World War II. … I do remember some of the farmers that moved over to the Port Arthur, Beaumont area to harvest crops, rice mostly, and a lot of them with very little education, moved to Port Arthur and that particular area to work the plants and in the Beaumont area also. But very few of them you ever heard that ever came to the Houston area. It was mostly around the Port Arthur area and I can't remember all the other little towns.

JT: Where did most of these Cajuns migrate from?

PE-TE: From the Eunice area, some of them lived around Opelousas, Ville Platte, Basille, and Elton. There's a lot of them [moved] from Lake Charles to the plants in Beaumont and Port Arthur back then, because that's where they paid higher wages … because back then, you was lucky to make fifty cents a day, to where if you went to work at the plants, you might make a dollar and a quarter an hour. So that was a lot of difference.

JT: Some of the things that make our people unique are our connections to the Roman Catholic faith, close kinship ties, marriage within the community, and our French language. Those things were hard to come by for the Cajuns who migrated over here to Texas. How do you think most of these families were able to cope with moving to a big city like Beaumont or Houston?

PE-TE: It was very hard on them, because I can remember several couples that got married and they moved out of town, out of state, and the women, especially the women, they couldn't cope with it. Within a month or less, they'd be back home again, and the next thing you know, there'd be divorces. They just couldn't cope with almost like a new world. If you moved out of, say, Eunice and you came to Houston, my God, that was something that they just couldn't understand, all the people and all the traffic and different bylaws and so on and so forth. They just couldn't cope with it. … Now, if they were moving to, say, Port Arthur or where other Cajuns was, they would pick up with other families and friendships, and it was more comfortable.

Paula Baltera, who assists Pe-Te by listing the artists and songs played on the Cajun Bandstand, Pe-Te with "co-host" Shaggy, and J. B. Adams, who hosts the "Zydeco Pas Salé" program on KPFT, Sunday mornings from 3:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m.

Photo by Debbie Z. Harwell.

But if they would move into an area where there wasn't any Cajuns, and a lot of them didn't have the education. Some of the husbands could barely read or write that would go to work in the plants or whatever. It was hard for him to go to a bank and want to make a loan or whatever because he didn't speak fluent English, it was broken English, and so he wouldn't be understanding all the new laws in a different community or state. So it made it rough on those people.

JT: How surprised were you when you moved to Beaumont in 1959 to find such a large population of French-speaking Cajuns there?

PE-TE: I was surprised. As a matter of fact, I worked for Wyatt's Cafeteria at the time, and when a lot of the customers would come in, I could pick up the dialect. … I knew where they were from. So I just automatically started speaking in French or asked them a question or say something in French, and, boy, they'd get all excited. … So it was quite a treat, to find a lot of Cajuns that did speak French, which you have a lot of them that was raised in Louisiana, from Eunice or whatever, and a lot of them never did speak any Cajun.

At the 2008 Bayou City Cajun Festival, Pe-Te presented Hunter Hayes with a baby accordion, knowing the country star had started playing accordion at age two. After playing "The Back Door" on the tiny instrument, Hayes then autographed it for KPFT to auction in a fundraiser.

They were taught, "Well, no, you don't want to speak that foreign language. You want to be high-class."

JT: How did that compare to Houston, where few Cajuns lived, when you arrived in the 1970s?

PE-TE: I almost lost my French on account of that. I didn't have nobody to speak to. That was my biggest problem, when I went back home maybe once a month . . . I went for a long time before I could run into somebody that did speak French.

CAJUN DANCES AND MUSIC

Pe-Te brought the first "Cajun Dance" to the Houston area in 1980. Saturday night "Cajun Dances" were (and still are) a traditional form of cultural and ethnic expression, where local Cajun French musicians performed at homes or on front porches. These dances pre-dated the amplification of musical instruments.

PE-TE: I was the first one that had Cajun dances here in the Houston area. When I started the barbeque place, my dream was to have Cajun dances. So not even a year after we opened the barbeque place, we had our first Cajun dance [there] and I think we had about forty people. It was supposed to only hold about fifteen. [Laughs.] But I brought a band in all the way from Louisiana.

JT: Do you remember that first band?

PE-TE: Oh, yeah. Lesa Cormier and the Sundown Playboys, and they played at the barbeque place for, God, for seven, eight years, I guess. …We used to have house dances when

I was a kid, and matter of fact, they'd have a house dance at one house one Saturday night, then next week or the two weeks later, they'd have another one at somebody else's house. Back then there was only one musician, a couple of musicians, and Amédé Ardoin, that played the accordion. I was only about two-and-a-half, three years old, and he played at my house. He was the only musician there. Back then they'd say, "Fais dodo," and they'd put the kids in the back room in the bed and everything, and you was supposed to stay in there and go to sleep. Man, that accordion music, it was in my blood. [Laughs.] And I'd drift out of there. Finally, after about the third time of getting a whoopin', they'd just leave me there and I'd just sit right there by his feet while he played.

Then later on, [they] had a fiddle player join him. Either Sady Courville or Dennis McGee would join him. But like I said, they'd move around. Then pretty soon a guitar player would come in. Different people would start, like Amédé Breaux or Joe Falcon; they would start putting bands together and everything. That's where all the dances would start, and pretty soon somebody opened a dance hall and then it went from there and pretty soon every town had a dance hall.

Every Saturday morning, Pe-Te gets up at 3:30 a.m. to make the drive in to the KPFT station in Montrose. At the controls with Shaggy by his side, he organizes his music, requests, and announcements for the three-hour program. Photo by Debbie Z. Harwell.

But all the music has changed so much. I remember when the Zydeco was first started because we had some black folks that lived down the road from us in the country and they'd invite us to go out there. The way it started . . . the Saturday, they would spend all day picking up the green beans, snap beans. Then the Sunday, they'd come over there in the afternoon, when it was cool, and they'd all bring their instruments and everything. While the women was out there snapping the green beans, they'd be playing their music. … I was just a little kid, but I'd go out there and break snap beans just for the heck of it and listen to the music. They had an old washtub turned over with a little rope tied to it to make some sound, and pots and pans they'd beat on, and it'd make some pretty good music. They had a few bottles of homemade brew and everybody would take a few little drinks. I was maybe eight or nine. I'd go over there and while they wasn't looking, I'd get me a little sip and everything.

JT: Was there ever any integration between the Zydeco musicians and the Cajun musicians at these house dances?

PE-TE: Oh, yes. Matter of fact, Amédé Ardoin, he was black and Dennis [McGee] was white. Poor Amédé, he was killed, I guess about a month after he had played at one of our house dances at home. Because back then there wasn't no air conditioning, they'd just open all the windows and try to let the fresh air come in. This was like in July, June, July, August, and it was so hot in there, you'd be wringing wet all the time. He'd be just a sweating, sweat would just run in his face while he was trying to play. One of the white women would get up there with a handkerchief and try to wipe his brow because the sweat was running down his eyes and so on and so forth.

In the fifties and the early sixties, until, oh, say, probably the early seventies, Cajun music just about died altogether. Everybody started moving towards big bands like Bob Wills and started playing the country music, like Jimmy Newman went from Cajun to country. PeeWee Kershaw, when him and Rusty and Doug broke up, he was with Bob Wills for about four or five years, toured and played with him, second fiddle. Then probably in the middle of the seventies, Cajun music started to come back up again. You had Nathan Abshire and a bunch of the other big bands like Steve Riley and some of those.

JT: What do you think has been the influence of the record studios particularly here in Houston, the influence on Cajun

People came from across the region and across the world to eat, dance, and listen to music at Pe-Te's Cajun BBQ House on Galveston Road. Celebrity autographs, over 4,000 license plates, and 3,000 golf balls decorated the 7,000 square foot facility.

Cajun fan-favorite, PeeWee Kershaw.

music, like in 1946 with Harry Choates and 1947 with Iry LeJeune and Clifton Chenier? It's kind of ironic if you think about the song, "Jole Blon." The lyrics are about a woman who leaves a Cajun guy for somebody in Texas, and here you've got a man from Acadia Parish, Harry Choates, who moves to the Golden Triangle to work in the shipyards and plays the fiddle at night, and he's the first to record the popularized version of "Jole Blon" by a Houston record studio. What we think of as "Jole Blon" today is really a Texas version recorded here, played here.

PE-TE: Right. But I guess what I want to try to say is the melody is just something that just gets into your system and makes you move. I don't know what it is about fiddle music, I mean, or the accordion. It's just something, once that sound comes out, it just sticks to you and you just want to keep listening to it. … Matter of fact, they've got two Louisiana national anthems. You've got "Jole Blon" and then "You Are My Sunshine." That's two. I guess I get just as many requests for "Jole Blon" as I do for "You are my Sunshine" on Saturday mornings. Very, very few recordings where they sing the "Jole Blon" in English. Now, some of them that will sing it bilingual; they'll sing it in French and then the next line they'll repeat it in English or French or whatever. I've even heard some of the Chicano bands do it in [Spanish], and it tickles me. But as soon as you hear the music, you know what it is. You know the words regardless—well, if you don't understand French, you can pick it up pretty fast.

JT: So, Pe-Te, you would agree with me that it's really the music that is kind of the main attraction?

PE-TE: It's not really the food that brings them in; it's the music. The crawfish and the étouffée and so on, they'll go for it, but you mention Steve Riley & the Mamou Playboys is

Pe-Te with record producer Huey P. Meaux and Jim Oliver, New Years Eve 1981.

JT: You see what you started? [Laughs.]

PE-TE: But I've enjoyed every minute of it. Somebody asked me here last week, "Pe-Te, you're going on twenty-seven years. We thought you was going to quit whenever you done twenty-five." Every time I get up to a level, I said, "I think I'm going to try and make thirty now." [Laughs] . . .

JT: How would you like to be remembered as a radio host?

PE-TE: I'd like for them to remember me as I was and what I enjoyed doing to promote the Cajun heritage. If you want to do something for me, do it while I'm still alive, don't wait till I'm six feet under. Don't send me no flowers while I'm dead, in other words. [Laughs.]

going to be there or Geno Delafonse, you might as well get ready for a crowd, because you going to have a crowd.

CAJUN RADIO

Through his many contacts, Pe-Te found several advertisers to help launch the new Cajun program that he recommended air on Saturday morning, 7:00 to 11:00 a.m. When Pe-Te asked who would be the disc jockey, the manager said, "You are." Pe-Te contacted some friends in the radio business and they encouraged him to do it. One DJ from Beaumont said, "Man, we need some more Cajun music in Houston." A year later, the radio station sold to a religious station and Pe-Te needed a new home for his Cajun music. He met with Huey P. Meaux at KPFT 90.1 FM who introduced him to the station manager and they agreed to bring Pe-Te's show to KPFT on Saturday mornings, 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.

PE-TE: One Saturday morning trail riders was coming through, and one of the trail riders was the general manager for KTEK in Alvin. I had an eight-track player set up and I was playing Cajun music on it at the barbeque place. He come in and he got all excited about it and he wanted to know who was Cajun and so I told him. He says, "I ain't got time right now to talk to you but," he says, "can I call you next week?" I said, "Sure." So I gave him my card and he called me the following week and he asked me to come into the radio station.

It's my culture, so, you know, hey, that's part of me. And so many Cajuns still coming in and we get phone calls from all over the world. I even had a phone call from the Space Station, from the astronauts up there. So I enjoy it. I love it, put it that way. . . .

More Cajuns are moving in here in the Houston area. Pretty soon, if Houston don't watch out they'll be calling it *Ti Mamou* [Little Mamou] or *Ma Mamou* [my Mamou] . . . you got Cajun entertainment every weekend over here in the Houston area and periodically during the week.

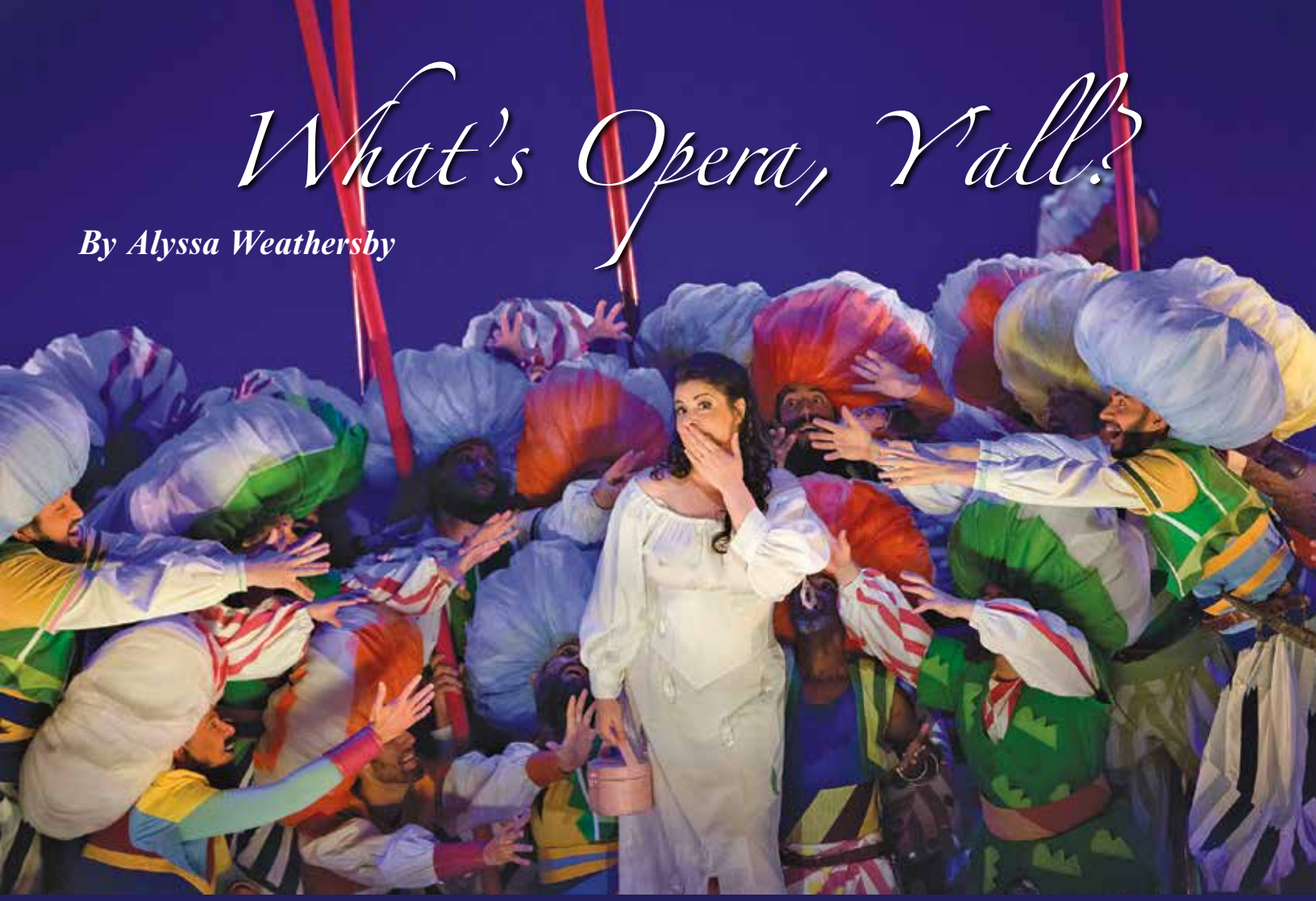
In 2007, Jo-El Sonnier presentedPe-Te with an award for Outstanding Achievement for his contributions to Cajun music and culture.

Pe-Te's Cajun Bandstand still airs on Saturdays from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. on listener-sponsored KPFT 90.1 FM. You can listen to past broadcasts anytime at http://archive.kpft.org/index.php.

Jason Theriot is a native of south Louisiana and a historian of Cajun culture. A published author, he earned his Ph.D in history from the University of Houston and lives in Houston with his wife and two ("Texas Cajun") children.

What's Opera, Y'all?

By Alyssa Weathersby



Daniela Barcellona as Isabella in **The Italian Girl in Algiers** *at Houston Grand Opera (2012).* **Photo by Felix Sanchez.**

When most people think of opera, a blonde woman—traditionally overweight—wearing a helmet adorned with horns comes to mind. While the Houston Grand Opera (HGO) is familiar with Richard Wagner's works and producing a long term project of the *Ring Cycle* in which this stereotypical woman appears, the young opera company offers its city a much more modern taste of the fine arts. HGO began as a regional company that only produced two shows a season and steadily gained notoriety until its continuous expansion called for a new venue: the Wortham Center. Constructed specifically to house the opera and the ballet, the Wortham Center offers Houstonians a cultural hub that hosts a plethora of social events. Through the efforts and support of a handful of dedicated patrons, the Wortham Center came to fruition, putting Houston on par with its East and West Coast brethren. Moreover, this enterprising spirit of Houston pervades the Houston Grand Opera and catapults it ahead of its competition through innovative methods of management and design.

All photos courtesy of Houston Grand Opera.

Aida *at Houston Grand Opera (1966).*

During the seventies and early eighties, the Houston Grand Opera seemed very young compared to its earlier-established counterpart in the arts, the Houston Symphony Orchestra. Both the opera and the ballet coexisted with the symphony in Jones Hall, adapting to a stage not quite suited for the more physical performances of dance and musical theater. The number of shows per season grew from the initial two of *Salome* and *Madame Butterfly*, to five and six and even seven.

Booking an evening at Jones Hall became a major issue, as the three arts companies battled for prime performance dates. Social events vied for the location as well, putting even more stress on the strained venue. Rehearsal time became difficult to schedule. The ballet found more performance opportunities outside of Houston than inside. National companies had to bypass Houston on their tours. Non-subscribers to the opera were unable to get tickets, as HGO was already oversubscribed. All of these factors stifled audience growth, and the idea for a new space to house the opera and ballet became inevitable under these conditions.[1] The question remained whether or not the establishment of the individual companies was strong enough to support the new theater.

Thirty seemed quite young in comparison to older opera companies in the United States, but despite any doubts, HGO pushed onward. Its famed performances, like *Porgy and Bess* in 1976, gave credit to the southern opera company. Houston Grand Opera began its penchant for innovative performances with its production of this folk opera by George Gershwin—no opera company had ever performed it in its original form as an opera. Only musical theater companies hired the all-African American cast for which the score calls. Breaking racial boundaries in an art form stereotypically stuck in a distant social past, HGO made its mark on a national scale, accruing a Grammy (the first awarded to an opera company) along the way.

The Houston Grand Opera was becoming too large and too notable to share Jones Hall with the Houston Symphony Orchestra. The Houston Symphony's home forced HGO to "[stage] works at intervals during the entire season." The company desired the accommodations to perform multiple shows on a simultaneous, rotating basis. Without this capability, HGO would never achieve national and international recognition.[2] To guarantee a high-class reputation, a world-class opera house was a must.

By the early eighties, the oil boom had dried up, and it left Houstonians in an economic slump to which they were not accustomed. Despite this, Houston pushed forward. Mayor Fred Hofheinz and City Council provided two blocks of land adjacent to the Alley Theatre, which solidified the soon-to-be-famed Theater District. Initially called the Houston Lyric Theater Foundation, the Wortham Theater Foundation was established in 1977 with the intent of building a new home for the HGO and the Houston Ballet. The budget was set at $70 million.[3]

The funding for the Wortham Center came entirely from private sources. Glen Rosenbaum, a partner in Vinson & Elkins and chairman of the Wortham Center, helped with the financing of the establishment. In addition to donating upwards of $150,000, the law firm was responsible for the negotiations and legal work surrounding the development of HGO's new space. Some interim financing was necessary, and the group agreed on an innovative solution to defray the massive budget cost. *Institutional Investor Magazine* even deemed this new form of bond "one of the most innovative bond advances of 1984." It "enabled the theatre center to

A Little Night Music *with Frederica von Stade as Desiree Armfeldt at Houston Grand Opera (1999).* Photo by George Hixson.

have a tax exempt financing ... and some advantage through arbitrage."[4]

People bought bonds with the conviction that their city needed a strong fine arts community. Although the shape of the land donated by the City of Houston restricted the design plans to come, the generous donation freed the city from the stigma of a lesser-class, southern city in comparison to those in the North. Houston would be noticed—by the rest of the United States and internationally. With the beginning of construction, plans for the inaugural performance also began.

Many factors, such as space, budget, and most importantly (and uniquely), the performers themselves, contributed to the design of the Wortham Center for the Arts. Architects worked to create a functional, yet beautiful building that would endure future growth and changing demands. Several important features include the orchestra pit, the house (audience) of the Brown Theater, the backstage, and the stage itself. Designers based the Brown Theater on a larger-scale theater, more like the Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center in New York than the smaller theaters, like the famed Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Italy.

The potential for acoustic disaster was immense, but Houstonian architects deftly sidestepped any unwanted drama. To economize on the limited space the city had graciously donated, the grand tier and mezzanine levels of the opera's "house" were very steep. Though this caused some initial dissatisfaction with audiences, it promoted the high acoustic quality that is necessary for the duration of an opera house. The seats are placed in such a way that "less than 2 percent of the audience [is] more [than] 140 feet from the stage" —shocking when you consider the size of the Brown Theater.[5] The hall is somewhat peculiar: an audience member will get more clarity of sound from the raised patron boxes, mezzanine, and grand tier levels than from the often desired orchestra level. The only tradeoff is the view. The initial audiences it hosted perceived the hall as too "live," causing reverberation to muddle the sound. Sound absorptive acoustic panels were installed to create the perfect aesthetic balance.

The seating and size of the two theaters in the Wortham Theater Center were designed to offer Houstonians a plethora of artistic experiences. The Brown Theater and the Cullen Theater seat 2,200 and 1,100 people, respectively. The ultimate marriage of artistic aspiration and physical capability was in the theaters' design. Brown Theater would be recognized as "a not-too-large main house … where true ensemble productions of large-scale-repertory [could] be realized," and Cullen would be known as "a jewel of a second house … where smaller-scale and more experimental works can be effectively produced with less financial risk."[6] With the vast difference in size, traveling shows (like musical theater productions or recitals) could offer a much more intimate performance in the Cullen Theater than what the Houston Grand Opera offered in the Brown Theater.

The designers also addressed the problem of balance in the placement of the orchestra pit, where the players and the conductor play for the duration of each show. Unlike many theaters of the time, the Wortham Center installed the Bayreuth pit.[7] Modeled after the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, the opera house home to Richard Wagner's works, the orchestra pit is inset underneath the stage. This allows for a larger orchestra size, as well as the previously mentioned balance of sound.

Above the orchestra, the theater's architects took great care in the creation of the stage itself. Preparing for the presence of the Houston Ballet, they designed a stage that

The Wortham Center's iconic arch during the early construction.

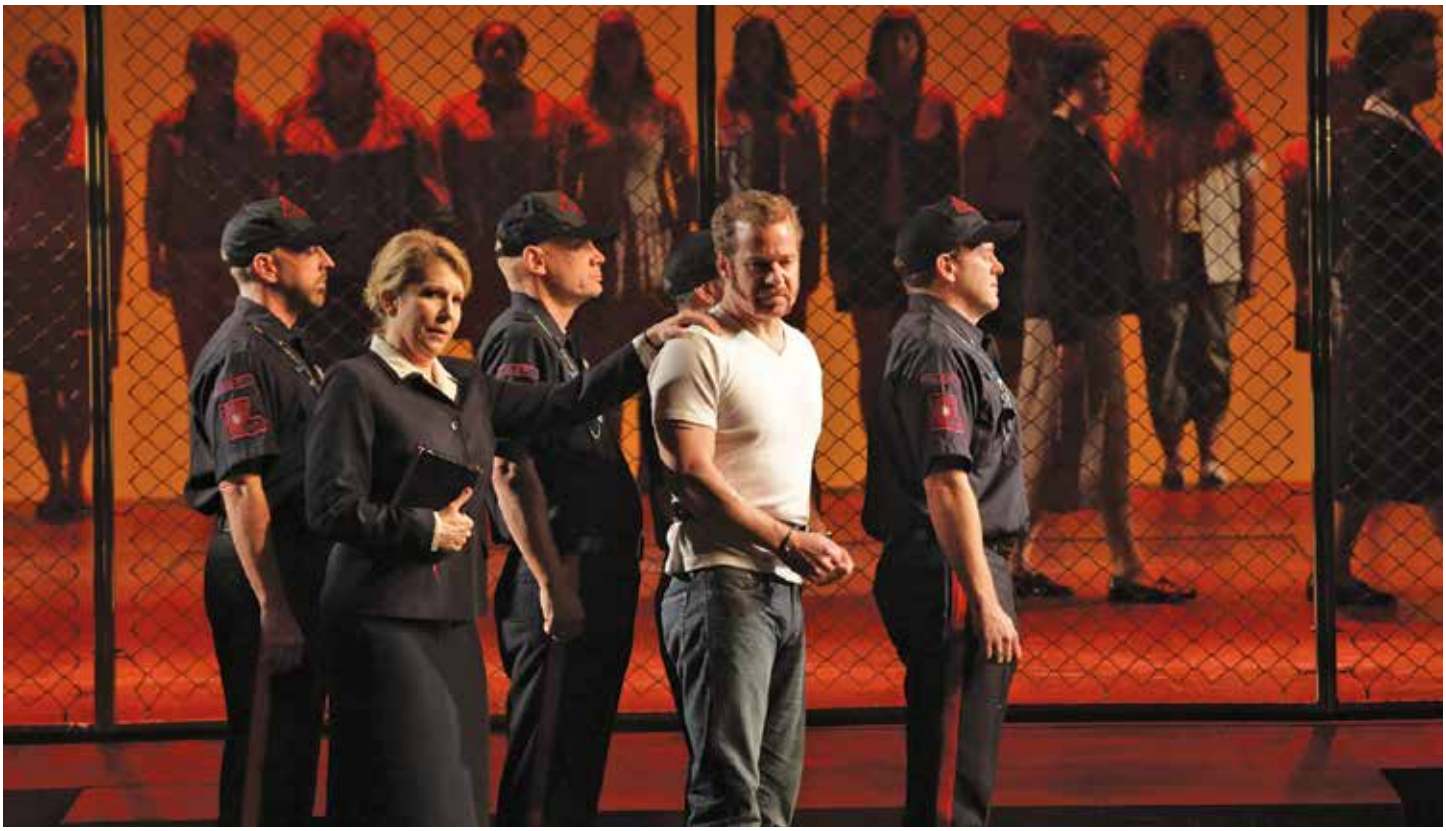
extended the career of professional dancers by up to ten years. Instead of building the stage over an unyielding, metal base like the stage in Jones Hall, architects used several layers of wood as a foundation, ensuring a softer and springier surface for the dancers. This change came much to the delight of the dancers, who applauded the improvements that few other stages offered.[8] All of these features remain in excellent condition thanks to the permanently-staffed backstage crew.

Backstage itself is a paradise for performers in comparison to many other performance halls. Space to hold the sets of multiple coinciding productions enables the Wortham Center to book more than one show during the week. This opens up endless possibilities—the opera can play on the same weekend as the ballet, resulting in a higher performance capacity and thus, more ticket sales for the ever-growing audience. Designers employed a still-functioning backstage crew for the various light, sound, and recording systems to keep them up to date. Whereas many opera houses pay an endless amount of their funds to replace equipment, the Houston Grand Opera aimed to maintain its property, lengthening the equipment's duration. With all of these promising new features, the Wortham Center catapulted toward its opening date. Maybe thanks to the fervid anticipation or simply the private dollars, the theater construction finished ahead of schedule.[9]

Society's elite waited in anticipation for the opening of the Wortham Center. Invitations were delivered for the gala inauguration black-tie event that took place on May 19, 1987.[10] A series of opening performances, first by the ballet, and later by the Houston Grand Opera (with the new work *Nixon in China* as well as the crowd-favorite *Aida*), christened the new theater. In accordance with Texan flare, a longhorn steer appeared at the event, offering a sense of Texan pride and humor in the face of national criticism. The question of Houston's ability to pull off a high-class fine arts center (located between Prairie Street and Buffalo Bayou, to the amusement of many) was laid to rest.

Audiences raved during cabaret-like performances of artists, including Texas-native Tommy Tune. Countless articles of "who's who" appeared in the city newspapers. The performance of John Adam's *Nixon in China* garnered various polite, witty reviews, but more importantly, set the stage for HGO's tradition of innovative performance and new works. Critics could not keep from commenting in their reviews on the "brick behemoth" itself, however. Amidst admiration for the new facility and all of its improved wonder, some believed that "lightness and grace [were] not the leading virtues of [the Wortham Center's] main facade's single, heavy, huge arch [… and that] inside, the vast foyer [was] either expecting an airplane or a decorator."[11] *Aida* weathered the criticism well, albeit with some dissatisfaction over the lack of live elephants on stage. International super-stars played title roles, such as Plácido Domingo as Ramades and Mirella Freni as Aida. This stellar cast, mixed in with HGO studio artists, set the high standard to which the opera company still adheres today.

As a cosmopolis, Houston relies on its fine arts community to endure as a world leader. International stars stop in the vibrant city during tours, and the Houston-based arts culture remains overwhelmingly strong. Whereas many arts programs across the nation are shutting down due to finan-



Dead Man Walking *with Joyce DiDonato as Sister Helen Prejean and Philip Cutlip as Joseph De Rocher at Houston Grand Opera (2010-2011 Season).* Photo by Felix Sanchez.

cial failure, HGO has succeeded in remaining relevant to its mercurial society. Incredibly forward thinking, the Houston Grand Opera performs a much higher ratio of new shows per season than any other company—even the Metropolitan Opera. HGO pursues new productions by composers who write to address current societal issues and appeals to broader audiences. For example, the first ever mariachi opera, *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna*, reflects the large Mexican-American population in Houston. HGO has broad appeal, producing music for the sake of their Houston audience and presenting outreach performances in various nearby towns. HGO became one of the first companies to produce modern political operas, like the controversial *Dead Man Walking*.

While the state of Texas may have the stigma of the Old South, the arts in the city of Houston blaze ahead with their progressive approach. Even in the difficult economy, the Houston Grand Opera has maintained its tradition of making opera an accessible art form. Early in HGO's growth, the tradition of free outdoor performances at the Miller Outdoor Theater began to help those unable to afford the not-so-dazzling cost of tickets. With the philosophy that ticket prices should never exceed a reasonable amount, even to support the expensive productions, and the contradictory philosophy that the production itself should never by sacrificed due to a deficit of funds, HGO relies on the graciousness of its patrons. Currently, HGO offers tickets at a discounted rate to students and other new-to-opera audience members. The durability of the company lies within its ability to grow with each new generation.

Singers who desire to perform with HGO have several avenues they can pursue. After extensive study in the vocal arts, they can audition for the Houston Grand Opera Studio, which offers more training and ample performance opportunities. Studio artists are often called on to cover smaller roles in the main stage operas. Sometimes, they fill in as understudies. HGO offers competitions, such as the Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers, that help aspiring singers get noticed.[12] Word of mouth, auditions, and luck are the formula for a singer's success.

Even if a singer does not crave the hard-won fast track to stardom, ample opportunities to perform with the Houston Grand Opera are available. HGO staffs its chorus with many talented singers—while it does not cover the entire cost of living expenses, it gives singers time to work elsewhere (often by teaching voice lessons) or attend school. HGO offers other performance alternatives, such as its Opera-to-Go program spearheaded by HGOco. Four to five singers bring the joy of opera to Houston's youth, presenting high-energy opera to schools, libraries, and community centers. Each show is fully staged and forty-five minutes, making the performance accessible to children and teens. Classic stories are adapted, such as *Strega Nona, Rapunzel*, and *Hansel & Gretel*.[13]

A common audition consists of arts songs and arias (usually with the expectation of an Italian aria and contrasting pieces in other languages), references, and often a pre-screening video performance. After several rounds of live auditions, singers are either called back or cut. Once a singer reaches the pinnacle of the operatic world, a contract with a major opera company, which can last anywhere from two to nine months, can pay as much as the value of a small house, with all amenities included—from housing to car insurance.

HGO's dedication to the development of the fine arts is evidenced by its artistic plan: "Houston Grand Opera has made its reputation by producing high-quality productions of the traditional opera repertoire in which all elements are rarities … and introducing them to America; by producing new American operas on a more consistent basis than any other American opera company' by introducing into the opera house repertoire the classic works of the American musical theater … by pioneering in-house development of new American works through commissions and workshops; and by training young American operatic talent in several disciplines through the Houston Grand Opera Studio."[14] The most remarkable milestone in the Houston Grand Opera's history is its move into the top-notch home, the Wortham Theater Center. Ever growing and adapting, HGO transcended its small roots in the basement of Jones Hall and flourished until it became recognized as an internationally acclaimed company.

Alyssa Weathersby is a senior vocal performance major at the University of Houston, Moores School of Music and Honors College. She performs with the Moores Opera Center as well as Mercury and Ars Lyrica in association with University of Houston's Concert Chorale. She will continue her vocal studies to support the growth of the classical music industry.

A behind the scenes look at the Wortham Center rehearsal room.

For the Love of Live Music: A Sampling of Houston Music Venues, 1930s to 1970s

By Lindsay Scovil Dove

The old Sunset Coffee building served as the home to the Love Street Light Circus Feel Good Machine in the heyday of psychedelic rock. This photo, "Alleys & Ruins no. 144, Light Circus" seems to capture that mood. Photo by Xavier Nuez - www.nuez.com.

Standing on the banks of Buffalo Bayou at Allen's Landing, Houston's birthplace, you can see a worn-down three-story building starting to crumble under the weight of the years. It is easy to dismiss with its boarded windows and the painted-over graffiti. If you did notice the former Sunset Coffee building, you might imagine an earlier time when goods were manufactured there and loaded on boats waiting along the bayou to take them to their destination. What most people would not envision, however, is that the building, and the psychedelic music that emanated from it, came to define Houston's youth counter-culture movement in the late 1960s.

Long before the sounds of the sixties generation rocked this building, though, Houstonians had already discovered their love for live music. The Eldorado Ballroom, located in Houston's Third Ward at 2310 Elgin Street, ranked as Houston's most popular venue for jazz, blues, and rhythm and blues. Built in 1939 in segregated Houston by C. A. and Anna Dupree, the art-deco style building represented a point of pride for the African American community. Many local musicians like Jewel Brown, Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins, Joe "Guitar" Hughes, and Johnny "Guitar" Watson went on to greater fame after getting their start at the Eldorado.[1] National stars that played there included Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Fats Domino, and Little Richard.

The ballroom, located on the building's second floor, allowed ample room for spirited dancing that earned the venue the nickname "Home of Happy Feet." Jackie Beckham, a Third Ward native, recalled people came there because they loved to dance. They dressed in the "best glittery stuff" they had because "it was like party time." Young people also had a chance to enjoy the Eldorado, which opened its doors to teens for weekly talent shows and Sunday matinee sock hops for teens that were alcohol-free.[2]

Changing times and the effects of desegregation took their toll, and the Eldorado Ballroom closed its doors in the early 1970s. The building remained, and in 1999 oilman

Known in the 1940s and 1950s as a place for good friends to get together, the El Dorado Ballroom hosted Houston's most renowned African American entertainers and musicians, many of whom are featured in this issue.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Herbert Finklestein who had bought the building from the Duprees donated it to Project Row Houses, a non-profit committed to revitalizing and celebrating the culture of the Third Ward.[3] The Eldorado Ballroom now serves as a special events venue and invites current generations to kick up their heels on its dance floor.

Built to celebrate the glitz and opulence of the time, the Shamrock Hotel's Emerald Room, by contrast, hosted many of Houston's most prominent white citizens at its elegant events. The hotel and its ballroom, situated at South Main Street and Holcombe Boulevard in the growing Medical Center area, opened in March 1949 with what some called "the wildest party in the city's history." Many famous performers, such as trombonist Tommy Dorsey, Broadway star Mary McCarty, and singer Dinah Shore graced the Emerald Room stage.[4]

As they performed, tuxedoed men swirled elegantly dressed women around the dance floor. The Emerald Room often hosted themed parties. On a Tuesday night in January 1952, for example, crooner Dick Haymes serenaded the guests attending "A Night at the Royal Hawaiian." The chefs served a gourmand's dream that included suckling pig, Polynesian chicken, hearts of palm tropical salad, and cream cheese with guava jelly. The lavish performance cost $8 per person for the dinner, or approximately $70 per person today.[5]

The Shamrock Hotel's Emerald Room became the place to hobnob with the city's elite while enjoying leading singers and performers. Unfortunately, the 1950s-era lavishness of the hotel may have ultimately been its downfall. When the city fell on hard times during the oil bust of the 1980s, the then Shamrock Hilton Hotel could not recover. Neither could it compete with the newer more modern hotels closer to the central business district. In 1985, Hilton donated the hotel to the Texas Medical Center, and two years later, the former Shamrock Hotel with its elegant Emerald Room was reduced to rubble. The land now serves mostly as parking for a division of the Texas A&M Health Science Center, although a portion of the hotel's original parking garage remains.[6]

On the north side of town, the Pan-America Ballroom was the first music venue in the city to have regular performances by Chicano and Tejano artists during the 1960s and 1970s. Located at 1705 North Main, the Pan-America had a capacity of 2,500, and patrons packed the hall to dance the night away while listening to bands from the United States, like Isidro Lopez and Little Joe, and from Mexico, such as Carlos Campos and Mike Laure. Local radio station, KLVL promoted the shows on air throughout the week to draw in crowds for the weekend. Gus Garza, who later became known as "Mr. Music Man," served as master of ceremonies at the Pan-America for several years and in 1968 became the first bilingual radio disk jockey in Houston for KLVL.

Promotional material accompanying this 1948 drawing indicated that R. D. Harrell designed the Emerald Room. Three walls were grey-blue with shamrocks in bottle green and chartreuse. The remaining wall was covered in red and chartreuse striped material. The specially woven carpet was green chartreuse and light blue in a Shamrock design. Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Garza saw many big-name Mexican and Mexican American artists perform at the ballroom, and described the Pan-America as "The House that Tejano music built."[7]

Among some of the most popular performances at the Pan-America were the big band or full orchestra groups. Houston's Mexican American teenagers met at the Pan-America for the Sunday matinee to dance to both Mexican and American music. Popular 1960s acts played at the ballroom such as Sunny and the Sunliners, a Mexican American group whose cover of Little Willie John's song, "Talk to Me" landed them on American Bandstand. Across the street, Poppa Burger was the place to grab a bite to eat after a long night of dancing. As one patron said, "if you didn't go down there [to Poppa Burger], you didn't go no place else." Both patrons of the Pan-America and bands who played there could purchase a fifteen cent little "pop" burger or a big "poppa" burger for thirty-five cents.[8] Although Poppa Burger still exists, today, the Pan-America building stands vacant and engulfed by construction from the expanding light rail.

While these venues and their musical genres drew people in droves, the psychedelic music scene created some of the most well-known live music clubs in Houston in the mid-twentieth century. As the music itself evolved, so did the focus of live music venues. Seating areas that allowed the patrons to concentrate on the music itself replaced large dance floors. The counter-culture of this era also experimented with mind-altering drugs, and the clubs and police officers generally turned a blind eye to this activity. According to Stephen (John) Hammond, an employee at The Catacombs, "They [the police] were present to maintain a safe environment for everyone. They understood that the patrons were our market and the musicians were our product."[9]

The Catacombs represented one of the earliest and most

The Pan-America Ballroom was a center for music and culture in Houston's Mexican American community. The Ballroom often exceeded its capacity of 2,500.

Photo courtesy of Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

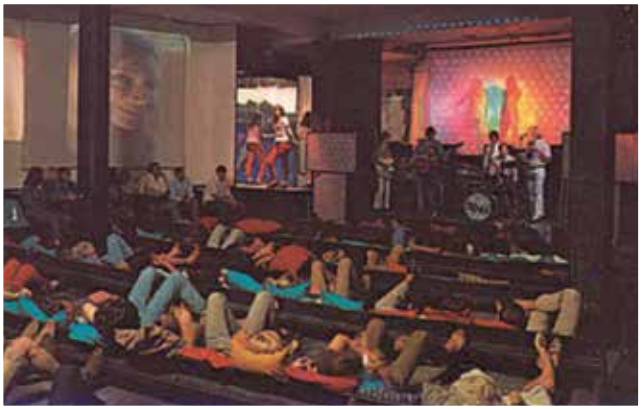
The Music Explosion performed at the Catacombs in December 1967. They had reached number two on the Billboard charts earlier in the year with "Little Bit of Soul."

Photo courtesy of Bruce Kessler / RockinHouston.com.

popular of these clubs. Located in what became the Galleria area at 3003 Post Oak Boulevard, The Catacombs drew major national talent like Jethro Tull, Mothers of Invention, and Country Joe and the Fish. The former slot car racing building transformed into a mecca of sorts for Houston's teens in the mid-1960s. The club's small space and low ceilings made for a venue and sound that bands loved. The lease on the building ran out, however, and the club's owners moved The Catacombs to the booming Rice Village area (in the space now occupied by Half Price Books on University Boulevard). The talent did not care for the larger venue, and behind-the-scenes politics caused a change in name to Of Our Own in the early 1970s.[10] Shortly after, in 1972, the club officially closed.

The Catacombs's biggest competitor was a groovy little place inside that now-dilapidated three-story building near Allen's Landing in downtown. Love Street Light Circus Feel Good Machine – or just Love Street for short – was the love child of local artist David Adickes. (Today's Houstonians know Adickes as the creator of *Virtuoso* at the Lyric Center and, more recently, the presidential busts near I-10 west of downtown and the "We (heart) Houston" sculpture on I-10 near Patterson.) Love Street occupied the top floor of the building, and Adickes installed twenty-four slide projectors that showed a variety of images throughout the performances. These images added greatly to the stimulating ambience and portrayed everything from flying birds to photos of patrons from the previous night.[11]

Love Street's other unique feature was the "Zonk Out" area. Instead of traditional tables or chairs, mattresses and pillows covered the main part of the club's floor, allowing the crowd to lounge as they listened to the bands, which included locally popular groups like Red Krayola, 13th Floor Elevators, and The Moving Sidewalks. The Moving



The Love Street Light Circus Feel Good Machine included the "Zonk Out" area where patrons could lounge comfortably to hear the music. The building will soon be repurposed for the Buffalo Bayou Partnership headquarters. A canoe, kayak, and bike rental facility will occupy the first floor; Partnership offices will be on the second; meeting and rental space will be on the third; and a rooftop terrace will round out the building.

Photo and rendering courtesy of Buffalo Bayou Partnership.

Sidewalks' front man, Billy Gibbons, soon became a part of ZZ Top, which played its first shows at Love Street in July 1969.[12]

By that time, ownership of Love Street had changed, and just three short years after opening, the doors closed in 1970. Despite its short life-span, Love Street's experimental use of space and focus on psychedelic local music cemented its title as the most popular counter-culture club in Houston.

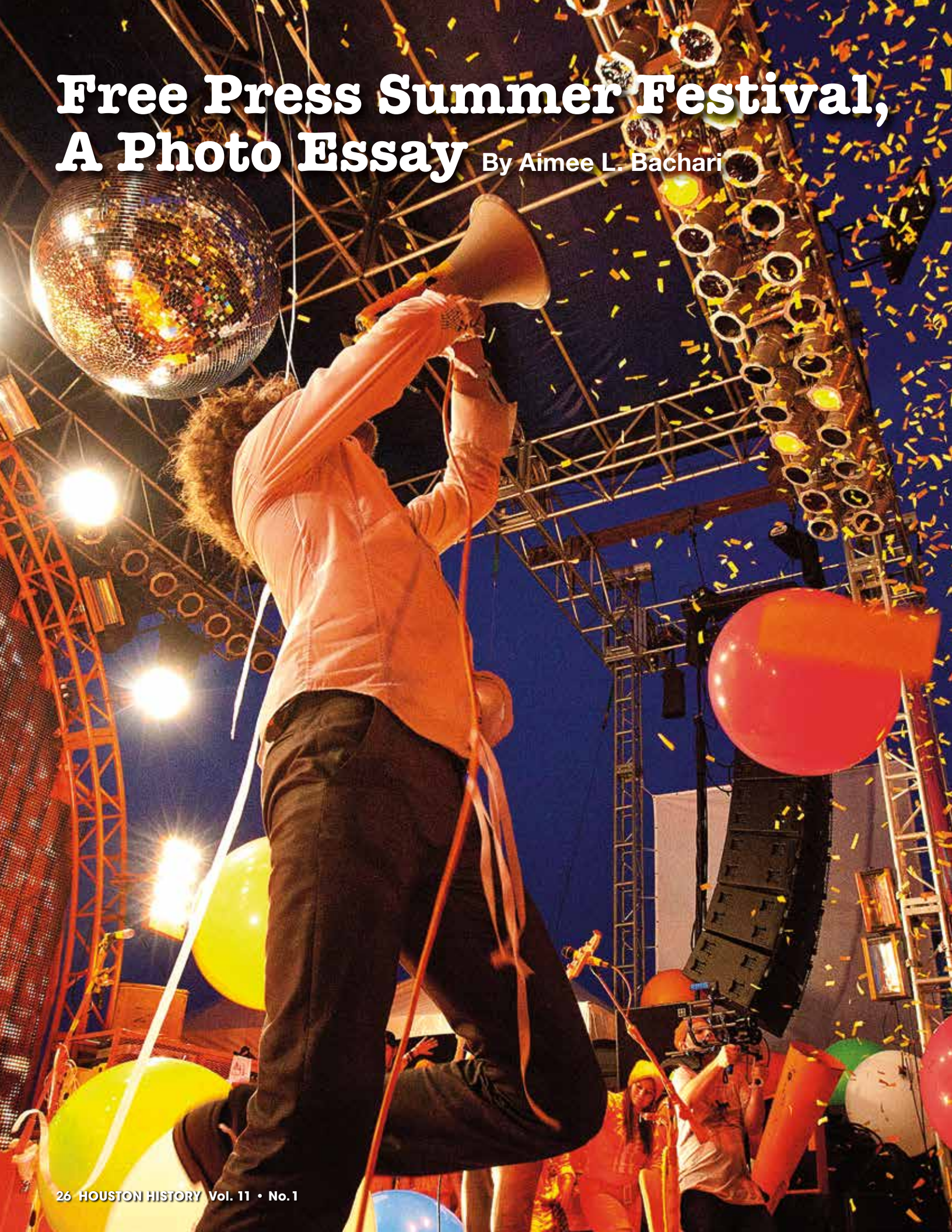
The closing of The Catacombs/Of Our Own and Love Street opened the way for the emergence of Liberty Hall. The church turned American Legion Hall turned music venue stood at 1610 Chenevert. While Love Street was the most influential venue locally, Liberty Hall ranked as the most popular nationally. Acts like Velvet Underground, the Ramones, and Ted Nugent all performed under its lights. Bruce Springsteen staged an epic concert there in March 1974 and even referenced the venue in his song "This Hard Land" with the lyrics: "Hey, Frank, won't you pack your bags/And meet me tonight down at Liberty Hall."[13] Despite its popularity, Liberty Hall closed its doors in 1978. The building was ultimately razed, and now only an empty lot remains.

Admittedly this list represents a sampling of Houston's live music venues, which also included the Plantation Ballroom, Jimmie Menutis' Lounge, the City Auditorium, Club Matinee, Club Ebony, La Terraza, Dome Shadows, La Maison, Rockefeller Hall, and The Cellar, among others. Nevertheless, each of these venues played an important role during its time in Houston's history, and while a few of these buildings remain, one is about to receive a new purpose. Buffalo Bayou Partnership recently acquired the run-down three-story building at Allen's Landing that once held Love Street Light Circus Feel Good Machine and plans to transform the 1910 building into a recreational and cultural center that will include bicycle, kayak, and canoe rentals among other services.[14] This place that played an instrumental role in Houston's counter-culture movement in the 1960s will once again serve an integral part in Houstonians' enjoyment of their city in the years to come. With the top floor available for private functions, perhaps music will once again rock this building that stands at Houston's "front door."

Lindsay Scovil Dove is a master's student in public history at the University of Houston where she interns for *Houston History*. She is also an avid activist for Houston's homeless animals.

Free Press Summer Festival, A Photo Essay

By Aimee L. Bachari



"It [Free Press Houston] *was something I'd talked about for a long time but once I lost my job and had no source of income, which was a good motivator, it was time to put up or shut up and there was a lack of any local, independent, alternative newspapers in Houston," Omar Afra recalls. He first funded* Free Press Houston *from a single tax return before finally selling advertising to cover costs. "My friends say I'm doing now what I did in high school: throwing parties, making flyers, and disseminating information. I always thought it would grow into a traditional newspaper model but I eventually realized it's value was less in being a canvas style, big bucks, publication and more about the specific demographic and message that we cater to."*

Image courtesy of *Free Press Houston*.

Omar Afra, one of the co-founders of Free Press Summer Festival, was born in Beirut, Lebanon, but has lived in Houston since the age of two. He attended Askew Elementary, Paul Revere Middle School, and Lee High School. Afra went on to a slew of community colleges, the University of Arizona, and the University of Houston to study journalism and political science. In 2003, he started *Free Press Houston*. Free Press TV started in 2009. Afra explains that, "the motive was originally to do the silly stuff we hatched in our heads. There was no financial or journalistic motive. Since then, we've managed to include serious content while continuing to interweave the silly stuff but it's still a work in progress." Free Press Summer Festival (FPSF), produced by *Free Press Houston* and Pegstar.net, began in 2009 and brings both local and national artists to Houston's Eleanor Tinsley Park each year. The following information came from a conversation between Omar Afra and Aimee L. Bachari on September 18, 2013.

For more information on *Free Press Houston*, visit www.freepresshouston.com. To watch Free Press TV, go to www.youtube.com/user/FPTVnews. To learn more about next year's FPSF, visit www.fpsf.com.

Aimee L. Bachari is a Ph.D. student in history at the University of Houston and associate editor of *Houston History*.

Wayne Coyne of The Flaming Lips performs at FPSF on Sunday, June 6, 2010. FPSF provides more than just a space for music. Eleanor Tinsley Park and Allen Parkway become artists' canvases, offering a chance for Houston and area artists to feature works before tens of thousands festival attendees.

All photos by and courtesy of Todd Spoth Photography, www.toddspoth.com, unless otherwise noted.

Country music singer and song-writer Willie Nelson, a native Texan, performed at FPSF in 2012. Other major performers from that year were Snoop Dogg, Primus, and Erykah Badu.

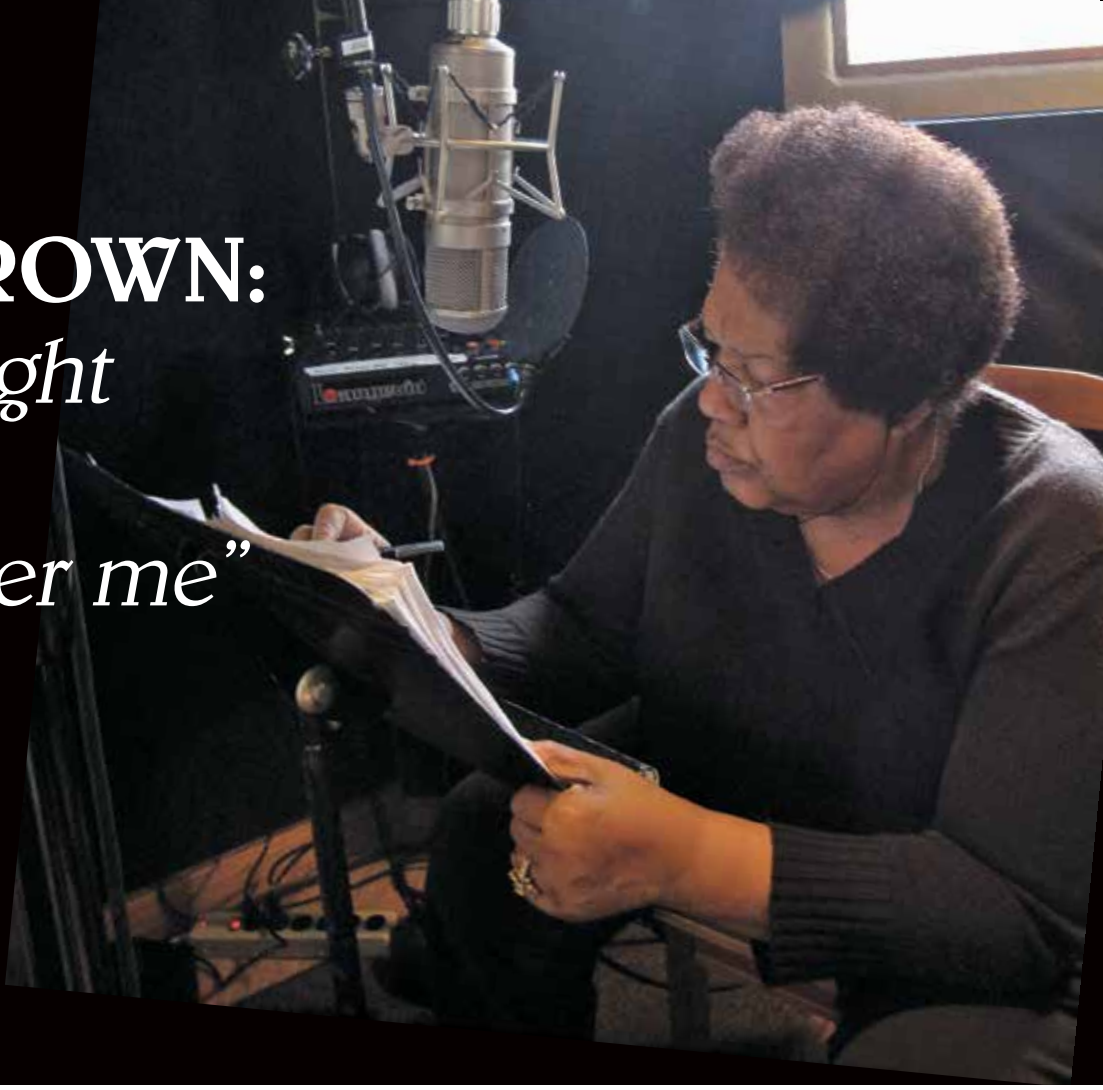
Rapper and native Houstonian, Paul Wall takes the stage in 2013. The banner behind him reads: "It does not matter who you are," the FPSF slogan that began in 2012. Also entertaining the crowds in 2013 was A Sea Es, a local Houston band. Other Houston artists and bands that have graced the stage throughout the history of FPSF are: Robert Ellis, Grandfather Child, Buxton, Side Show Tramps, The Ton Tons, and Los Skarnales (see Natalie Garza's article on Mexican American music in this issue).

Free Press Summer Festival has continuously grown since its inception in 2009 when it outgrew the smaller Westheimer Street Festival. The first FPSF attracted 18,000 people to Houston's Eleanor Tinsely Park, and in 2013, over 80,000 people attended the festival. Major Lazer performs wearing a Clyde Drexler jersey at the 2012 FPSF. Drexler attended the University of Houston and was a member of Phi Slama Jama from 1980-1983. He came back to Houston to play for the Houston Rockets from 1995-1998.

Omar Afra describes the move from the smaller Westheimer Street Festival that lasted five years to the current Free Press Summer Festival: "We felt, after the Westheimer Street Festival came to a demise the year prior, that we wanted to continue to carry the torch. We wanted to keep music and art in Montrose alive, the locals wanted us to do it, and we were happy to oblige. It was a great precursor to FPSF." This photo shows the main stage on June 6, 2010, during The Flaming Lips performance.

JEWEL BROWN: *"There's a light in my life shining over me"*

By Dina Kesbeh



All photos courtesy of Eddie Stout and Dialtone Records.

"I was nine years old . . . I prayed and I asked the Lord, 'Please show me, direct me in a way to be able to help my mom and dad.'"[1]

Most kids that age today worry about what features the next iPhone will have, but not Jewel Brown. She had aspirations and aimed high to succeed. She wanted to become a singer, and so she did.

Jewel Brown was born on August 30, 1937, in Houston's Jeff Davis Hospital. Her family lived in Third Ward in a shotgun house, which she described as "loads of fun and multi-loads of love." Her father worked long hours but still made time to play with his six children when he came home. Brown's mother did sewing for the neighbors. She loved to garden and helped her husband with their vegetable garden where they grew the family's food.

Brown attended Blackshire Elementary and remembers being caught by the assistant principal asleep at her desk. When he asked the class who she was, they all responded, "Jewel Brown." In her dream, though, she had heard someone asking what she wanted to be when she grew up, so she woke up and exclaimed, "A singer!" The whole class laughed at her, but little did they know what the future held in store.

A portrait of Jewel as a young woman on the mantel at her Third Ward home.

Jewel joined the Rose Hill Baptist Church choir and performed at the age of nine at the Masonic Temple in Fourth Ward. That year she met Nat King Cole when he performed at Fifth Ward's Club Matinee, a defining event that helped her realize what she wanted to do with her life. At twelve years old, she sang at the Eldorado Ballroom. All of those who heard her soulful voice were astounded to learn her age; and from that moment on, the crowd identified her as a professional singer. At thirteen she sang with Lionel Hampton in the Auditorium, and sat on Bobby "Blue" Bland's knee to sing with him in Dickinson.

Brown had her first professional singing job at the Manhattan Club in Galveston. Her late brother, Theodore, who was called Thiddle, played in Henry Hays's band with Elmo Nixon. As Jewel stood in the doorway watching her brother and the rest of the band get ready to leave, her brother asked Henry if she could come with them. Henry said they did not have room, but when Thiddle offered to let her sit in his lap, Henry relented, adding that he could not pay her.

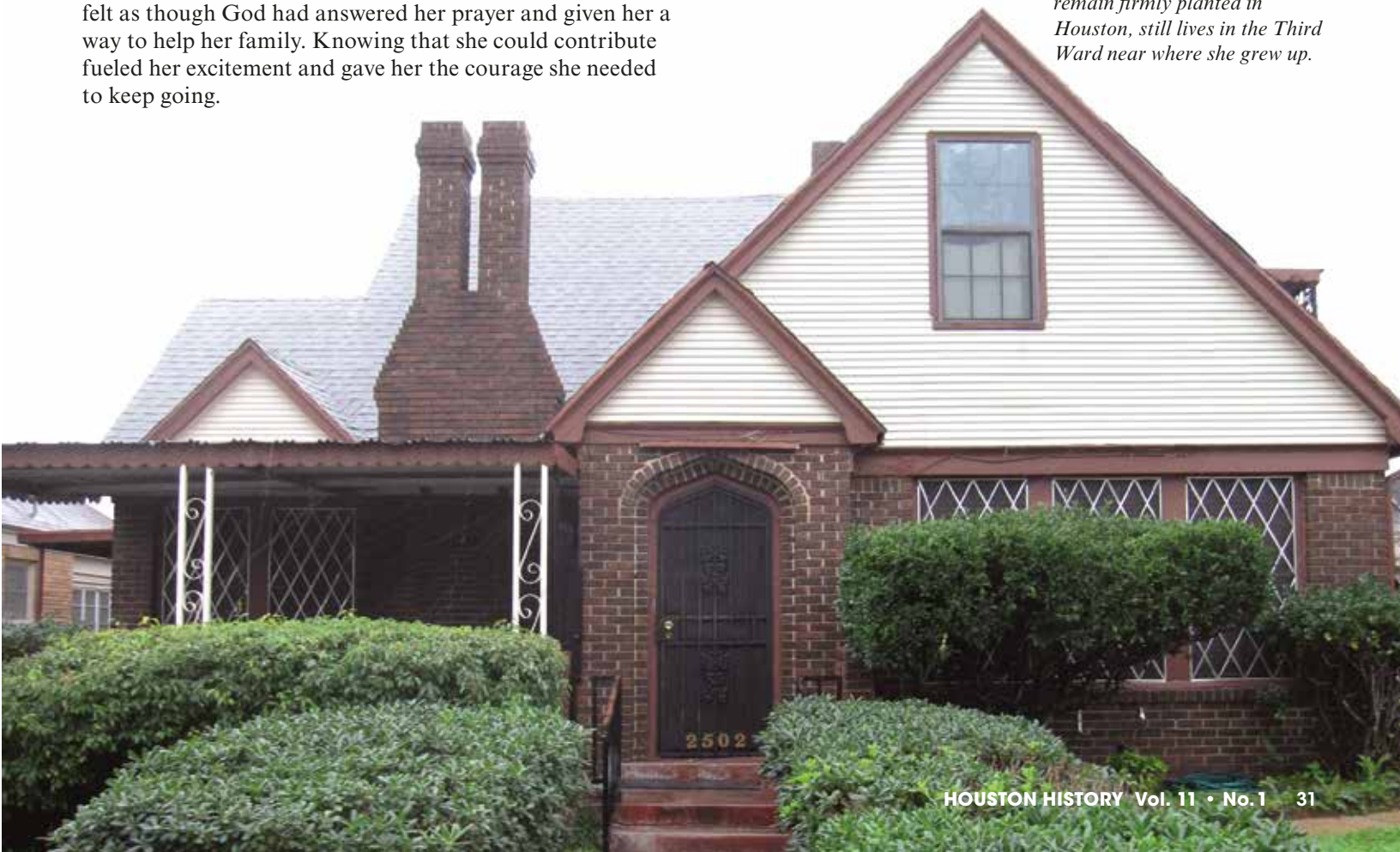
After Jewel sang with them during the show, Henry informed the band members, "The owner has said that we can have this gig six nights a week and the other band can have it one night a week if we can bring Jewel." After confirming that the Browns' mother approved, Henry accepted the job. The band agreed to pay Jewel a dollar a piece from their share to compensate her since she was responsible for their good fortune.

Jewel Brown became a hot commodity after her first appearance. Her talent helped her pocket five dollars here and ten dollars there from patrons' tips, making her eager to get home and show her parents how much money she made. She felt as though God had answered her prayer and given her a way to help her family. Knowing that she could contribute fueled her excitement and gave her the courage she needed to keep going.

In her teens, Brown went to Jack Yates High School, which the community referred to as Jack Yates University because of the quality of the teachers who "made sure you got it." She recalled one algebra teacher, who was a large woman, stepping on students' toes if they did not do the work, "It was funny but it still hurt. We didn't take it as a viscous thing. We took it as 'you better get your lesson or that woman would step on your toe.' It was just fun really." Today, she lamented, it would be considered abusive. She continued performing during high school but put school ahead of music until she graduated.

The singer grew up listening to jazz and blues, which originated in African American communities in the South. To many artists, blues became a form of expression. The heart and soul of blues music comes from within the artists. Standing on stage in front of the crowd with their eyes on her, Jewel seemed to wake the room almost effortlessly with her talent. Brown reminisced on the importance of Dowling Street in her Third Ward neighborhood and its history to those who valued the art of blues. Dowling represented the hot "night spot" where all kinds of entertainers shared their talent with the community, a local version of Harlem's Apollo Theater. Some of the hidden talent discovered in Houston included Illinois Jacquet, Arnette Cobb, and Hubert Laws (see Andrew Vodhin's article on jazz in this issue).

On a trip with her family to visit her sister in California in 1957, the twenty-year-old Brown jammed with her sister's husband, who "blew saxophone," and his friend Louis Rivera, who played the piano. Rivera insisted that they



Jewel Brown, whose roots remain firmly planted in Houston, still lives in the Third Ward near where she grew up.

Jewel Brown and Milton Hopkins performed in a "Centinenial Celebration of Lightnin' Hopkins" at the Chicago Blues Festival in 2012.

go to the club where he worked, and they headed to Club Pigalle on Figueroa Street in Los Angeles to continue jamming. Blues musician Earl Grant approached his boss at the club, Leroy Baskerville, about a job for Jewel. Without hesitation, he said, "Hire her." She accepted the unexpected job offer and soon watched her family head back to Houston without her.

Brown worked in Los Angeles for about a year before heading home to Houston. She had barely settled in before receiving a call to go to Dallas where she worked for Jack Ruby for over a year (yes, *the* Jack Ruby). At the same time, Tony Pappa, with the Associated Booking Corporation, was searching for a featured singer to perform alongside Louis Armstrong and his All Star Band. Pappa spoke to Joe Blazer who considered it important enough to fly from New York to see her show. The two men were deliberate in making a decision, but a good word from Brown's ex-husband caused the men to stop delaying and choose her.

Jewel remembered receiving the phone call and having just a few hours to get from Dallas to Houston to catch her flight. Driving back she had the "pedal to the metal" when a highway patrolman stopped her. She said, "I looked at that man with them big crocodile tears rolling out of my eyes letting him know I've got to get on this plane. He said, 'Ma'am you go ahead on just be careful.' . . . I wish I knew him today if he was still living because he did me such a favor." She had a little help too from the skycaps at the airport who knew her from Club Ebony and led her through a short cut to the plane waiting for her on the tarmac. She went straight from the plane in New York to a bus for the first gig in Boston. "I didn't have time to think," she remembered. "I didn't have time to get afraid. I didn't have time for nothing. Just do it, do it, do it!" Brown and Armstrong toured together from 1961-1968 and collaborated on many songs, including their hit "Jerry."

Traveling around the world to Asia, Europe, South America, and Australia was great experience and kept Brown's career alive; but after her mother had a stroke, she made the decision to move back home to help her father. The headliner for a show called "Fillies de Soul" in Las Vegas, Brown told the producers that she had to leave. After all, her parents were her rock. She felt it was her duty to take care of them just as they took care of her as a young girl.

After Brown's mother passed, her father deeply mourned the loss of his wife, and Brown decided she could not go back on the road. She stayed with her father until he died. Over the years, she had done everything she could do for her parents and her son, at times selling insurance, taking

in sewing (trained by a designer who worked with Edith Head), and fixing hair. When Brown began receiving phone calls to tour Europe again, she said, "My mom passed, my dad passed. So there wasn't anything for me to do but go on and live for myself and that's what I do now. I take it all in stride."

Today, Jewel Brown remains in the Houston community where she grew up. Although she travels to all parts of the globe, her heart remains in Houston. Her talent was born on the streets of Third Ward. Without it, she would not have her many memories nor would she have become the Jewel Brown who made everyone jump out of their seats with her soulful voice. Brown proudly explained, "Everything we had back in the day was an authentic pure thing. Illinois Jacquet, Arnette Cobb, that was purity. There's still many people in the European countries that call them the purists because that's what they like, they like authenticity. I guess that's why I have more work because I don't use gimmicks, falsettos, and all that kind of stuff. I'm just a flat foot floosey! Just belt out the real thing."

Dina Kesbeh is an undergraduate student double majoring in print journalism and political science at the University of Houston.

Jewel Brown visits with Roger Wood, author of Down in Houston: Bayou City Blues *and* Texas Zydeco.

Bayou City Jazz Greats

By Andrew Vodinh

Long after The Ink Spots with Houstonian Huey Long (bottom left) disbanded, the group's music and influence on popular culture lives on in the Martin Scorsese film Raging Bull*, "The Day the Earth Looked Stupid" on* The Simpsons*, and the opening of Megadeath's song, "Set the World Afire."* Photo courtesy of Anita Long, Ink Spots Museum.

Music has always been a part of my life. In high school, I joined the jazz band, blindly playing music on the guitar and clarinet without knowing much about the artists, their background, or their contributions. Eventually, though, I became curious about jazz's origins and the influence of Houston's jazz artists on the genre and was surprised to learn that many of them got their first breaks in the industry as high school musicians.

A musical genre played by individuals and bands at all levels, jazz originated at the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States in southern black communities. The use of blue notes, conflicting rhythms, improvisation, rhythmic stresses, and the swing note combine to define jazz. In the 1920s, it blossomed in cities such as Chicago, Kansas City, Memphis, and New Orleans, causing the period to be dubbed the "Jazz Age." No city in Texas can claim to be a founder of jazz; nevertheless, Texas produced superior jazz artists, including Aaron Thibeaux "T-Bone" Walker from Linden and Oran Thaddeus "Hot Lips" Page from Dallas.[1] The Houston area flourished with phenomenal players like Milton Larkin, Arnett Cobb, Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, Illinois Jacquet, Hubert Laws, and Huey Long who contributed to jazz music's rich history.

Houston's jazz scene kept up with national trends and led the state with its development. Sounds of the newly emerging jazz styles featuring the clarinet, trumpet, and saxophone with the piano could be heard coming from several local establishments.[2] From the honking tenor saxophone of Illinois Jacquet to Huey Long's improvisational Dixieland guitar style, Houston's innovative musicians influenced the jazz we hear today at universities, night clubs, and concert halls.

Milton Larkin of the Milt Larkin Allstars

Many jazz musicians recognize Milton Larkin as an originator of Houston jazz during its developmental era because he brought together many of the city's best talents who became top-of-the-line artists. Born October 10, 1910, in Navasota, Texas, Larkin and his mother moved to Houston after his father died when Larkin was six years old. He fell in love with music at the age of ten, learning about musicians through magazine images. Mostly self-taught, he started playing the trumpet at sixteen and mastered the instrument while playing in the Phillis Wheatley High School band. An all-black school, Wheatley showcased its marching band that included many students who played jazz around town to earn money. Larkin and other band members gained experience playing at bus stops, which contributed to the negative image of musicians.[3]

In 1936, Larkin started his own band, which included

Band leader Milton Larkin, considered a father of Houston jazz, gathered many of the city's best musicians to play in his orchestra. Larkin is featured in a PBS documentary, The Bigfoot Swing. Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, Arnett Cobb, and Illinois Jacquet, with whom he toured around the southwest United States. They gained recognition, although they never recorded together and the opportunity helped lay the foundation for their future success. Larkin disbanded the group upon entering the army during World War II. After the war, he recorded with multiple ensembles, playing the trumpet and the trombone, which he took up during his military service.

In the 1970s, Larkin moved back to Houston, where he performed for physically handicapped children, mentally ill patients, and elderly audiences, later receiving the Jefferson Award for community service.[4] When he died in 1996, musicians, politicians, and members of the press came to his funeral to pay their respects and acknowledge his contributions to Houston and jazz.

Arnett Cleophus Cobb, Wild Man of the Tenor Sax

A member of Larkin's 1936 orchestra, Arnett Cobb was born on August 10, 1918, in Houston's Fifth Ward. Cobb discovered music at an early age and played a range of instruments including the piano and the violin, but he switched to the saxophone after joining the eighty-piece brass band at Wheatley High School. Wheatley and Jack Yates High School competed against each other in music and football, and the competition motivated musicians like Cobb and Vinson to become the best.

Cobb, known as the "Wild Man of the Tenor Sax," made his professional debut in 1933 with Vinson in Frank Davis's band. Cobb later played under trumpeter Chester Boone with Vinson until 1936 when he met Milton Larkin. After

Arnett Cobb and His Orchestra featured Cobb on the tenor sax. Cobb was especially known for "Smooth Sailing," which Ella Fitzgerald recorded. Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

Like Milton Larkin and Arnett Cobb, saxophonist Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson had his own orchestra. In 1947, he had a double-sided hit for Mercury Records with "Old Maid Boogey" and "Kidney Stew Blues."

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Reserch Center, Houston Public Library.

traveling with Larkin's band, Cobb replaced Illinois Jacquet in Lionel Hampton's band in 1942. He toured with Hampton until 1947 when he formed his own seven-piece band. Cobb suffered spinal problems as a result of a childhood car accident that hampered his new-found success. Unfortunately a later car accident required him to have spinal surgery. Despite permanently relying on crutches, he continued his musical productions as a jazz soloist in the 1970s and 1980s.[5]

Cobb impacted jazz music on several different levels. He described his band's style as "straight-ahead jazz with melody in it with a Texas quality." Cobb's individual style with the tenor saxophone helped maintain the special quality of historic jazz and is recognized by today's jazz audiences as the "Texas Sound." One of his last contributions insures the history of jazz will be preserved for future generations—the creation of the Texas Jazz Heritage Society, which established the Texas Jazz Archive in cooperation with the Houston Metropolitan Research Center at the Houston Public Library.[6]

Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson

Born in Houston on December 18, 1917, Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson took up the alto saxophone as a child and his talent gained recognition from local bandleaders. Vinson debuted with Cobb in Frank Davis's band and toured regionally with him under Chester Boone during school holidays while attending Yates High School.

After graduating in 1935, Vinson joined the band full-time. A year later, he became part of Milton Larkin's band where he met other prominent jazz artists including Aaron "T-Bone" Walker. The band's touring schedule exposed Vinson to musicians like "Big" Bill Broonzy, who taught him to shout the blues, and Charlie "Bird" Parker, who taught him alto saxophone technique. In late 1941, Vinson joined trumpeter Duke Ellington's new orchestra in New York City where he made his recording debut for OKeh Records. Vinson also recorded under Hit Records and Capitol Records with American jazz trumpeter Charles "Cootie" Williams's orchestra.

In late 1945, Vinson formed his own big band, recording small-group bop and blasting band instruments for Mercury Records. His main output, however, consisted of suggestive jump-blues sung in his unique Texas style. Maintaining his style, Vinson began recording for King Records in 1948, often with all-star jazz elements and toured with King's jazz subsidiary, Bethlehem Records.

Vinson returned to Houston and retired in 1957. In 1961, fellow alto saxophonist "Cannonball" Adderley rediscovered Vinson and enlisted him to record with the Adderley brothers' band at Riverside Records. Demonstrating the popularity of his Texas style, Vinson found full-time employment at worldwide jazz and blues festivals until his death in Los Angeles, California, on July 2, 1988.[7]

Illinois Jacquet, Pioneer of the Honking Tenor

Another big name in the Houston jazz scene was that of saxophonist Illinois Jacquet. He was born on October 31, 1922, in Broussard, Louisiana, but his family moved to Houston's Sixth Ward when he was six months old. Both his jazz and cultural roots grew out of Houston. Playing music ran in the Jacquet family, including his father, Gilbert Jacquet,

Illinois Jacquet revolutionized jazz and rock and roll music with his "honking tenor" style of play. Photo courtesy of Library of Congress.

who played bass in a railroad company band. At the age of three, Jacquet and his five siblings began tap dancing for his father's band. He later played drums in the band until he discovered his true passion, the saxophone. Like fellow artists Larkin and Cobb, Jacquet went to Wheatley High School and could not wait to start playing saxophone in the high school's marching band. In the late 1930s, Jacquet began traveling with artists such as Lionel Proctor, Bob Cooper, and Milton Larkin. After leaving Houston to pursue his dream of touring professionally, Jacquet produced a new sound and style for the tenor saxophone through his classic solo on "Flying Home" recorded with the Lionel Hampton Band on May 26, 1942. Jacquet contrasted the upper register on the tenor saxophone with the lowest notes on the horn giving birth to "the honking tenor," now a regular feature of jazz music and a trademark of early rock and roll.[8]

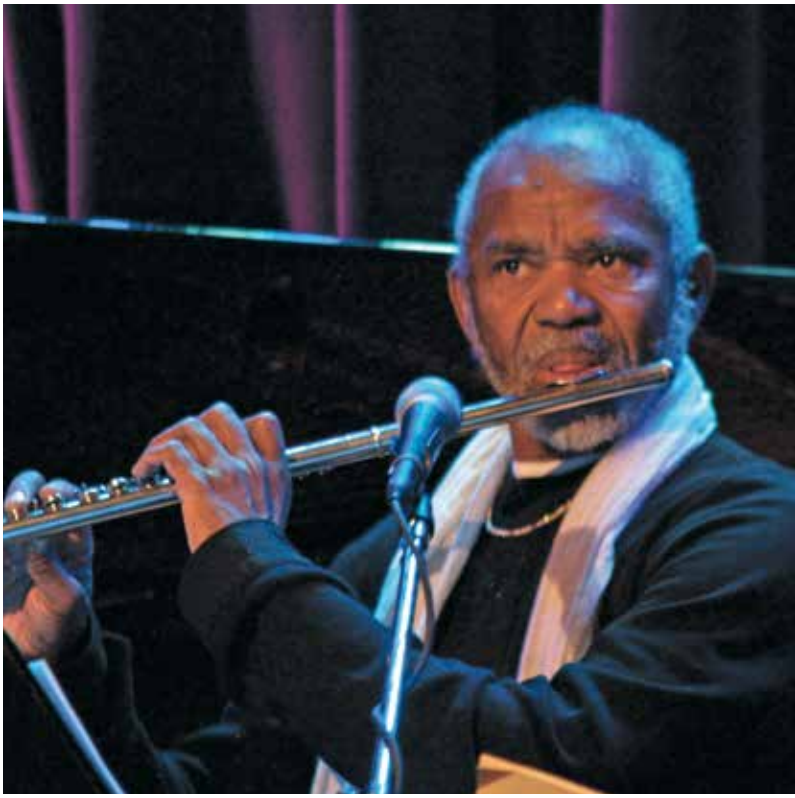
In addition to his musical contributions, Jacquet played an important role in integrating Houston jazz audiences at the Music Hall on October 5, 1955, during the annual "Jazz at the Philharmonic" tour featuring Jacquet, Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson, Buddy Rich, and others. With his roots in Houston, Jacquet wanted the city to see "a hell of a concert." Being accustomed to playing to integrated audiences, Jacquet also wanted to do something to improve the living standards for young black Houstonians and knew that he would regret it if he failed to take a stand against segregation in his hometown. With jazz producer Norman Granz's addition of a non-segregation clause in the show's contract and Jacquet's marketing, they paved the way for future integrated concerts in Houston.[9]

Jacquet's legacies demonstrate his commitment to improving conditions for young people. In 1993, he served two semesters as a Kayden Artist-in-Residence at Harvard. On May 21, 2001, The Juilliard School of Music awarded Jacquet an honorary Doctorate of Music degree. To honor Jacquet's passion for jazz education, his daughter, Dr. Pamela Jacquet-Davis, his granddaughter, and his manager founded the Illinois Jacquet Foundation (IJF). The IJF collaborated with Julliard in creating the Illinois Jacquet Scholarship in Jazz Studies given to an individual pursuing a musical career with a concentration in jazz. Although Jacquet passed away on July 22, 2004, his legacy continues through his honking tenor style and his role in desegregation and music education.[10]

Hubert Laws, Renowned Jazz Flutist

Hubert Laws was born in Houston, Texas, on November 10, 1939. The second of eight children in a musical family, he grew up playing rhythm and blues and gospel at neighborhood dances. He started out on piano, switching to mellophone and later to the alto saxophone. In high school, he picked up the flute after volunteering to fill in on a flute solo with his high school orchestra. Wheatley High School band director Sammy Harris exposed Laws to jazz, and he enjoyed the freedom of improvisation and creativity the genre offered.[11]

Laws attended Texas Southern University for two years before leaving for Los Angeles with the Modern Jazz Sextet, now known as the Jazz Crusaders. After a few years in California, he won a one-year scholarship to attend The



Houston's Hubert Laws has become one of the most renowned jazz flutists of all time, playing with the New York Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Photo courtesy of wikicommons.

Julliard School of Music. He spent the next thirty-one years in New York playing with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra as well as the New York Philharmonic. Laws recorded his first album for Atlantic Records in 1964 before subsequently going to CTI Records and then Columbia Records.[12]

Philosophically, Laws believes that today's musicians would do well to learn to play in an assortment of musical idioms.[13] He continues to entertain audiences, performing in both orchestras and his personal band. Alongside Herbie Mann, Laws remains one of the most well-known and appreciated jazz flutists.

Huey Long of the Ink Spots

Although born on April 25, 1904, just west of Houston in Sealy, Texas, Huey Long had his roots in the city. He worked various jobs in the Houston area until the opportunity struck to play banjo in Frank Davis's Louisiana Jazz Band in 1925. The band became known as the "Dixielanders," a term for musicians playing Dixieland music, otherwise known as "hot jazz" or "early jazz." The band migrated to Chicago where Long appeared at the 1933 World's Fair, "A Century of Progress," with Texas Guinan's Cuban Orchestra. At that point, Long gave up the banjo and started to play the guitar.

In 1942, Long joined Fletcher Henderson's band and moved to New York. In 1944, he formed his own trio with C. C. Williams on the piano and Eddie Brown on the bass. Around this same time, the vocal group the Ink Spots had begun to define the musical genre leading to rhythm and blues and rock and roll. Lead singer Bill Kenny talked Huey Long into giving up his trio to temporarily become an Ink Spot. Long joined the group at the peak of its success, providing guitar accompaniment and vocal support and recording several songs, including "I'm Gonna Turn Off the Teardrops," "Just For Me," and "The Sweetest Dream." He stayed with the group until their guitarist Charlie Fuqua returned from the army in October 1945. In the 1950s, Long continued touring the United States with his own trio before moving to California to pursue music education at Los Angeles City College. He later returned to New York where he formed his own group of the "Ink Spots," taking them to California.

Later, Long again returned to New York where he taught and wrote music. After writing and arranging more than eighty songs for his chord melody guitar style, he moved back to his roots in Houston, where his daughter, Anita Long, developed a display of his history, memorabilia, and songs, which can be found at the Ink Spots Museum. Although Long is mainly known for his contributions to the Dixieland guitar style, the chordal progression on a banjo allowed him to improvise with multiple notes rather than a single note by moving chords up and down the frets. With his experience on the banjo, he approached the guitar similarly, improving his guitar solos and improvisations.[14] Huey Long passed away on June 10, 2009, at the age of 105; however, his improvisational playing style on both the banjo and guitar continues to live on in jazz and other musical genres.

Huey Long gave up the banjo for the guitar after migrating to Chicago and appearing at the World's Fair, "A Century of Progress," with Texas Guinan's Cuban Orchestra. He signed this photo of himself for his mother in 1933.

Photo courtesy of Anita Long, Ink Spots Museum.

Houston's Jazz Legacy Today

Jazz has held its ground in Houston despite changing musical trends in the 1960s and 1970s. The former jazz scene associated with bars failed when downtown clubs became too expensive and customers remained at home due to reports of high crime rates. Nevertheless, jazz music remains popular today as evidence by the dedication of numerous school band directors and school jazz bands, as well as summer workshops creating a new generation of fans and performers.

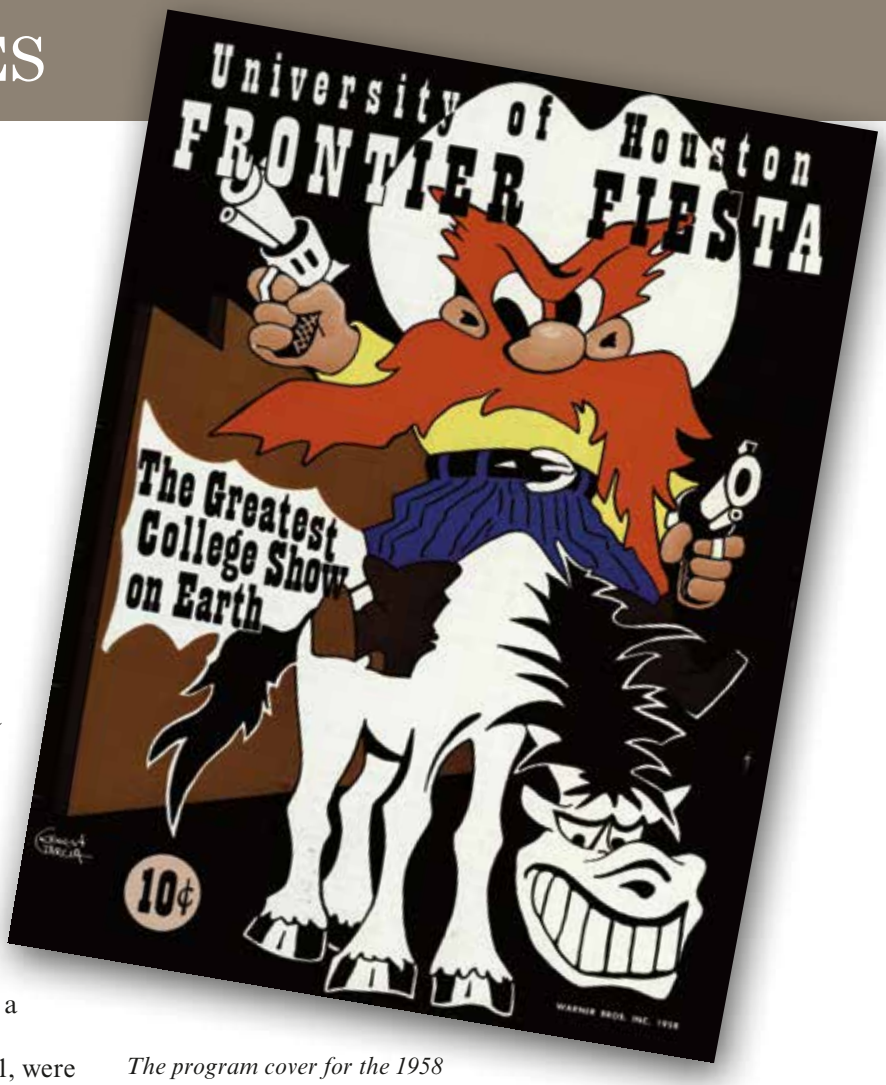
The Jazz Heritage Society of Texas, created by Arnett Cobb, recorded an album at the Wortham Theater Center commemorating "75 Years of Texas Jazz."[15] The Texas Jazz Archive was established by the Jazz Heritage Society of Texas, which gathers oral, written, and photographic materials on local and regional jazz artists. With the innumerable contributions of Houston jazz artists and the efforts of jazz fanatics today, jazz continues to resonate with Houstonians.[16]

Andrew Vodinh was born and raised in Houston. He attended the Awty International School where he participated in multiple extracurricular activities, including wind ensemble and jazz band. A student in the University of Houston's Honors College, Andrew is currently pursuing a degree in chemical engineering.

FRONTIER FIESTA: "The Greatest College Show on Earth"

By Mary Manning

A University of Houston tradition, Frontier Fiesta began seventy-three years ago as an amalgamation of musical and theatrical performances, cook-offs, carnival booths, and concessions. Each spring, Fiesta volunteers transform a piece of vacant land or a parking lot on campus into a western frontier-style town called Fiesta City to accommodate the festival, which has had three separate runs. This article concentrates on the first two runs of the festival as the history of the current run is not yet well documented. The University Archives hopes to remedy this as it works with the Frontier Fiesta Association to chronicle the more recent events in preparation for a Frontier Fiesta exhibition in spring 2014.



The program cover for the 1958 Frontier Fiesta used the phrase "The Greatest College Show on Earth" – a moniker given to the event by a Life *magazine article in the early 1950s.*

All images courtesy of UH Frontier Fiesta Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

The original Frontier Fiestas, held in 1940 and 1941, were almost immediately interrupted by World War II and suspended from 1942 to 1945. Reestablished in 1946, it ran until 1959, was again reinstated in 1992, and continues today. Frontier Fiesta is, and always has been, a fundraising event. The early Fiestas raised money to address campus needs, such as a student recreation center or swimming pool. Later, and to date, proceeds from the festival fund scholarships for entering freshman and current students.

Walter W. Kemmerer, then comptroller and director of curriculum and later president of the university, conceived and cultivated Frontier Fiesta as a way to engender and maintain school spirit, balance defense-oriented projects with extracurricular activities, and respond to student dissatisfaction over the lack of an intercollegiate sports program and a student recreation center. Kemmerer was determined to make Fiesta a success. He recruited student leaders and urged "the entire student body [to] take part in Frontier Fiesta, recreating for Houston the good old days when men were men, women loved them for it, and a maverick was an unruly steer instead of an unruly politician."[1] He earned the nickname "Doc" by working tirelessly, day and night, alongside students to build Fiesta City.

Held on April 26, 1940, in conjunction with a long-established annual Houston Independent School District high school reception, the first Frontier Fiesta featured talent shows, musical and dance acts, concessions, and games along with what became a long-time festival highlight: the beard growing contest. During its first year, Fiesta raised $2,000 toward building a student recreation center. Frontier Fiesta's second run saw the event grow to great popularity and achieve national acclaim. In the early 1950s, *Life* magazine proclaimed it the "Greatest College Show on Earth." During its heyday, Frontier Fiesta attracted as many as 100,000 people to the UH campus, including celebrities and visitors from all over the nation. The 1955 Frontier Fiesta signed over a check for $106,000 to help pay for the university's swimming pool.

It took hundreds of students each year to run the event—starting with the selection of its officials in the fall through its close in late spring. The beard-growing contest grew in popularity, "spurred on by constant publicity and by the Ford automobile that Don McMillan, a local dealer, traditionally awarded to the contest winner."[2] Students built elaborate floats for the downtown parades. The festival included a pre-Fiesta dance, musical and theatrical shows on the Midway, auctions, barbeques, an original song contest, and many of the features still associated with Fiesta. It grew to a week-long event; however, its great popularity and the merriment that ensued also led to its demise.

Students perform in a stage show at Frontier Fiesta in the 1950s.

The beard contest was a highlight of Frontier Fiesta for many years. Here a student has his beard shaved after the contest, 1950s.

In the mid- to late-1950s, President A. D. Bruce and Vice President Clanton Williams identified "Frontier Fiesta and credit" as one of thirteen trouble spots at the university. The "credit" referred to academic credit that students could earn for a drama course by working the spring festival. The examination of the credit's legitimacy incited a full-scale, heated discussion of Fiesta's value. The festival had many loyal proponents, including thousands of spirited alumni and Hugh Roy Cullen. Bruce and Williams took on what they called the "Fiesta problem" by raising questions with the faculty about how much the carnival, and its week of spring holidays, interfered with class attendance and assignments. They also examined "its potential to damage institutional image and incipient fund-raising if its negative aspects got out of hand."[3]

In the end, the administration limited the time and expenditures that could be spent on the festival and put in place academic criteria (e.g. 2.0 GPA) for students to qualify to run the event. This placed a damper on the 1959 Frontier Fiesta, and the university cancelled the 1960 event to conduct a feasibility study for the 1961 Fiesta. A poorly-reviewed musical comedy called the *Cougar Capers* attempted to replace Frontier Fiesta with a three-day run March 16-18, 1961. These events led to the end of the second run of Frontier Fiesta, which vanished for over thirty years.

In 1992, alumni, student leaders, and the University of Houston's Athletic Department resurrected the long-lost tradition. The student-run, community-minded festival continues to celebrate the spirit of the University of Houston and the talent and leadership ability of its students. Every year the Frontier Fiesta Association awards scholarships to incoming freshman and current UH students in recognition of their academic achievement and outstanding efforts in community service.

The current run of Fiesta includes many of the features of the earlier festivals. Each spring, Fiesta volunteers still build, from the ground up, a western-themed town known as Fiesta City. The festival still includes Broadway-style variety-shows put on by campus organizations, and the festival even reinstated the old favorite beard-growing competition in 2012! (Sadly, without a car for the grand prize.) However, Fiesta now includes events such as a BBQ cook-off and Bake Fiesta that differentiate it from earlier runs. Family Fun Day, founded in 1996 as "Cougar Kid's Day," is oriented towards UH faculty and community families and features child-centered programming and carnival activities.

In 2013, the demolition of Robertson Stadium forced the move of Fiesta City to its new location adjacent to the Campus Recreation and Wellness Center and the East Parking Garage. An effective fundraising event throughout its many years, this year's event raised $11,500 in scholarship funds. In the past fifteen years, Fiesta has awarded more than $100,000 in scholarships.

A 1950s Frontier Fiesta float moves through downtown Houston, instructing the crowd, "Don't you dare miss it!"

THE ARCHIVAL COLLECTION

The UH Frontier Fiesta Collection (University Archives, UH Libraries Special Collections) captures the western-themed revelry surrounding Fiesta City and documents the history of Frontier Fiesta through all its iterations, from its beginnings in 1940 until today. The collection includes financial records, contracts, programs, organizational records, correspondence and memos, show scripts, newspaper clippings, film, photographs, and negatives.

Highlights of the collection include photographs featuring all aspects of the festivities, from stage performances and students posing in western costume to parade floats and the wooden structures making up the Wild West town each year. Programs from the 1940s and 1950s present the calendar of events and maps of the grounds as well as the names of event organizers and friends, board of directors, and contest winners. *The Great Bank Heist*, a black and white silent film, depicts an Old West-style bank robbery perpetrated by gunslingers who ride into town on horseback.

Especially noteworthy is Fiesta City's charter drawn up by students in 1952 and branded onto a tanned cowhide by student Betty Rich and taken to Austin for Governor Allan Shivers's signature. Student leaders Helen Gilpin, Johnny Goyen, and Jack Valenti compiled a beautifully crafted, thirty-five-page, cowhide scrapbook with color drawings and descriptive narrative that capture well the essence of Frontier Fiesta held April 19-24, 1954.

Many of these collection materials have been digitized and can be accessed through the Frontier Fiesta Digital Collection, http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/p15195coll14.

UH Chancellor and President Renu Khator participates in Family Fun Day at Frontier Fiesta, March 2013.

THE EXHIBIT

University Archives, a part of UH Libraries' Special Collections, will display Frontier Fiesta related materials in the exhibition area on the first floor of M. D. Anderson Library, March-June 2014. Exact dates are still to be determined. Please contact University Archivist Mary Manning at mmmanning@uh.edu for more information.[4]

Mary Manning is the university archivist at the University of Houston Libraries' Special Collections. As its curator, she collects, preserves, and makes available archival materials that document the history of the university and its students, faculty, and staff.

Frontier Fiesta Oral Histories

In October 2012, Charlie Sicola ('64), president of UH Atlanta Alumni Association, came to the university for homecoming and agreed to be interviewed by the Frontier Fiesta Association about the importance of Frontier Fiesta. The organization expanded the project to include all alumni interested in sharing their thoughts and stories about the long-standing Cougar tradition. In one of the first interviews, Welcome Wilson Sr. explains the value of Frontier Fiesta to students past and present:

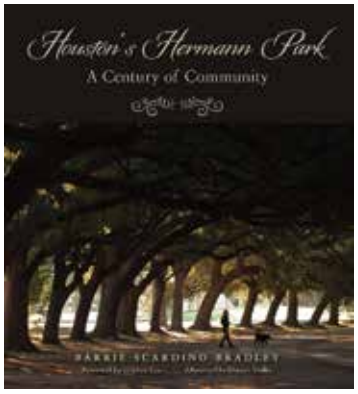
"Frontier Fiesta is an opportunity for students to learn—to learn organization, to learn how to meet deadlines, to learn how to be a success in life.

"It's an opportunity to build student spirit; and it's an on-campus activity, and we, in my view, need on-campus activities now that we have 8,000 students living on campus. I think Frontier Fiesta will grow and thrive."

Welcome Wilson Sr.
Photo courtesy of Nancy V. Clark.

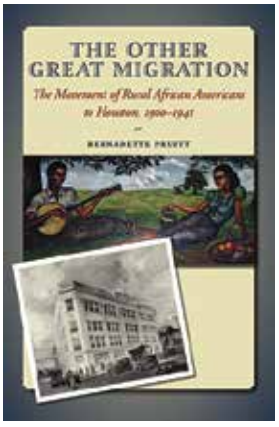
News Updates & Books *by Barbara Eaves*

BOOKS



Houston's Hermann Park: A Century of Community, by Barrie Scardino Bradley; foreword by Stephen Fox, afterword by Doreen Stoller (Texas A&M Press, $45). The author sets one of the city's oldest and largest parks in local and national contexts. The city's early leaders hoped to connect Houston to markets beyond its region; however, by 1910, they realized that most other major American cities had an urban park patterned after New York's Central Park. In 1914, George Hermann announced his donation of 285 acres to the city for a municipal park and planning began to create a park to anchor the city's open spaces. Bradley uses plans, maps, and photographs to document the development of the park and the accomplishments of the Hermann Park Conservancy since its founding in 1992.

Historic Preservation Manual: A Guide to Preserving Historic Districts – The City of Houston has published an online manual to help homeowners understand the requirements for construction in historic districts. It offers guidance on how to designate, maintain, or modify a landmark, maps showing historic districts, and more. Visit www.houstontx.gov/planning/HistoricPres/HistoricPreservationManual/index.html.



The Other Great Migration: The Movement of Rural African Americans to Houston, 1900-1941, by Bernadette Pruitt (Texas A&M Press, $40). In the first half of the 1900s, 50,000 blacks left rural Texas and Louisiana and came to Houston, whose proximity to minerals, transportation, and industrial development promised social advancement and prosperity. Using census data, manuscript collections, government records, and oral histories, Pruitt offers details about the migrants; their networks, jobs, and neighborhoods; and the culture and institutions they brought with them that transformed the city.

The Houston Symphony: Celebrating a Century, by Carl Cunningham, includes chapters by archivists Ginny Garrett and Terry Brown (Houston Symphony, $70). This 200-page book is available at the Symphony Store in Jones Hall during performances, the box office, and volunteer office at 1220 Augusta Drive, Suite 250.

NEWS

MEMORIAL PARK – Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects was selected to draft plans, guided by history and public input, to redesign Memorial Park. The Hogg family established Memorial Park in 1924 in memory of the 25,000 doughboys who trained at Camp Logan for World War I. The city subsequently bought the land for park use. Houston's largest park with 1,500 acres, it has suffered recently from drought, flood, and hurricanes. Memorial Park Conservancy, the Houston Parks and Recreation Department, and the Uptown Houston TIRZ have joined in this initiative, which could take twenty years to implement and cost up to $100 million. Visit www.memorialparkconservancy.org.

MEMORIAL PARK CONSERVANCY

SAM HOUSTON PARK, the city's oldest park and home to The Heritage Society, has completed a major renovation. Along with infrastructure improvements, the Fourth Ward Cottage was moved to the park's north side next to the Rev. Jack Yates's home and will be included on The Heritage Society's 51st Annual Candlelight Tour December 14-15. Visit www.heritagesociety.org.

DEER PARK PRAIRIE – With just hours to spare, more than 1,000 people raised $4 million in thirty days to save the Deer Park Prairie, a pristine, fifty-acre example of one of the world's most endangered ecosystems. Large contributions came from Terry Hershey and the Hamman Foundation. One man offered his 1951 Studebaker, but most were $10-to-$50 gifts to Bayou Land Conservancy via the internet. Native Prairies of Texas will manage the land, renamed Lawther Deer Park Prairie after the former owners, and open it for tours. A conservation easement to Bayou Land Conservancy means the land will never be developed.

BETHEL PARK – A new park at 81 Andrews Street in Freedman's Town pays tribute to the history and architecture of Bethel Missionary Baptist Church founded by Rev. Jack Yates in the late 1800s. When fire gutted the church's interior in 2005, the city stabilized the walls and bought the property to preserve the façade and create a park. With funding from TIRZ 14 and the Fourth Ward Redevelopment Authority, the city retained a team to clear the site and develop a conceptual design before breaking ground in August 2012 on the $4.6 million project.

HERMANN PARK CENTENNIAL YEAR – In 1914, George Hermann donated 285 wooded acres that became

Trenton Doyle Hancock, artist rendering of multimedia installation for Hermann Park train tunnel.
Image courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai, and Hermann Park Conservancy.

Hermann Park. Landscape architect George Kessler proposed most of the park's signature elements, but the Depression and world wars interfered with its completion. In 1995, the Hermann Park Conservancy adopted a two-phase master plan and has since raised nearly $120 million in funding. It has transformed Lake Plaza, and renovations to the Grand Gateway and the Centennial Gardens should be completed by October 2014. A year's worth of changing art elements will be on display as part of the *Art in the Park*, including a permanent installation in the train tunnel. Visit www.hermannpark.org.

SAN JACINTO MUSEUM OF HISTORY is raising $700,000 to complete the acquisition of thirteen acres adjacent to the Battleground and begin construction on the Monument's most extensive revitalization since it opened in the 1930s. The plan's centerpiece is the San Jacinto Museum of History Association Annex and Visitors Center that will include expanded exhibition space, an improved environment for the permanent collection of artifacts, added space for research on the region's history, and a visitor's center to convey an accurate interpretation of the park's significance. Visit www.sanjacinto-museum.org.

BUFFALO BAYOU PARTNERSHIP launched a mobile app, the Buffalo Bayou Guide, for iPhone and Android phones. It highlights the bayou area from Shepherd to Allen's Landing and identifies the location of parks, recreational areas, points of interest, artwork, parking and access, amenities, and future plans. It is free on iTunes and Google Play. If you prefer paper maps, free Buffalo Bayou Trail Guides are available at Hotel Icon (220 Congress), the City Hall Visitor Center (901 Bagby), or at www.buffalobayou.org.

BATTLE OF SAN JACINTO APP – In partnership with the Texas State Historical Association, JoSara MeDia presents a multimedia app on "one of the decisive battles of the world," with links to TSHA's Handbook of Texas Online. It includes *The Battle of San Jacinto* by James W. Pohl (1989); panoramic views of the battleground, giving a feel for what combatants saw; and Jeff Dunn's "Mapping San Jacinto" from the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*. $4.99 at iTunes.

The Houston Community College building, which housed **SAN JACINTO HIGH SCHOOL** from 1926 to 1971, has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places in recognition of its long association with public education and its neoclassical and Art Deco architecture. The original 1914 structure and two additions (1928 and 1936) are undergoing a $60 million renovation, scheduled for completion for next year's centennial. The San Jacinto High School Alumni Association is raising an additional $1.5 million to restore the Court of Honor, a park-like area paved over years ago for parking. Visit www.hccsfoundation.org/memorialgreen.

BUFFALO BAYOU PARK – With more than twenty years' experience managing large-scale parks, **Bobby Gregg Burks** joined the Buffalo Bayou Partnership as director of Buffalo Bayou Park, 2.3 miles of land west of downtown undergoing a $58 million renovation. Funding includes $30 million from the Kinder Foundation, $5 million from Harris County Flood Control, $23 million promised by the Partnership, and $2 million annually from Downtown TIRZ #3 for maintenance and operation. Burks manages the improved areas as they re-open: trails, pedestrian bridges, dog park, Water Works and Lost Lake, kayak and bike rentals, venues, lighting, and landscaping. Everything should be completed by mid-2015.

SAN JACINTO BATTLEGROUND – **Bill Irwin**, the new complex superintendent of the San Jacinto State Historic Site, brings twenty-eight years of historic site management and interpretive experience, including the past eighteen years with the Republic of Texas Complex (Washington-on-the-Brazos, Barrington Living History Farm, and Fanthorp Inn).

PRESERVATION HOUSTON – **Stephanie Ann Jones,** new executive director, brings some twenty years of nonprofit experience, most recently as senior director of Events & League Relations for the Houston Symphony.

THE TORCH COLLECTION has a new name and will soon have a new home. The collection, owned by J. P. Bryan Jr., includes 12,000 documents, 5,000 books, rare and antique books, saddles, antique firearms, spurs, fine art, religious art, and folk art. Bryan purchased the Galveston Orphans' Home at 1315 Moody (21st) Street, to renovate and reopen as a museum and research center, the Mary Jon & J. P. Bryan's Visions of the West Collection.

EVENTS

DEC. 6, 7, 13, 15, 21: Christmas Cruises along Buffalo Bayou, 5:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Enjoy decorations, lights, songs, and cheer! Tours on a first-come basis; capacity twenty-one people. Board at Allen's Landing (Commerce and Main). Adults $7; children $5; cash only. Visit www.buffalobayou.org.

DEC. 8: Holiday Tea benefitting The Heritage Society. Call 713-655-1912.

DEC. 12: Blanket Bingo at Market Square, 6:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. The $10 admission buys bingo cards (10 games) and chances to win prizes donated by area businesses, including a private pontoon ride down Buffalo Bayou for twenty-one, a one-night staycation at Hotel Icon, and $500 cash. Proceeds support Buffalo Bayou Partnership. Visit www.marketsquarepark.org.

DEC. 14, 15: The Heritage Society 51ST Annual Candlelight Tour at Sam Houston Park. Visit www.heritagesociety.org or call 713-655-1912.

MARCH 15, 2014: The USS *Texas* BB-35 will celebrate the centennial of its commissioning, sponsored by the Battleship *Texas* Foundation that includes music, interactive displays, tours, food trucks, and fireworks. Tickets $14, available online, www.battleshiptexas.org, or at the event. In conjunction with the centennial, the **Bullock State History Museum** in Austin will mount an exhibition in the Rotunda from February through June.

APRIL 4-6, 2014: The Sons of the Republic of Texas holds its annual meeting in San Antonio at the Marriott Plaza Hotel.

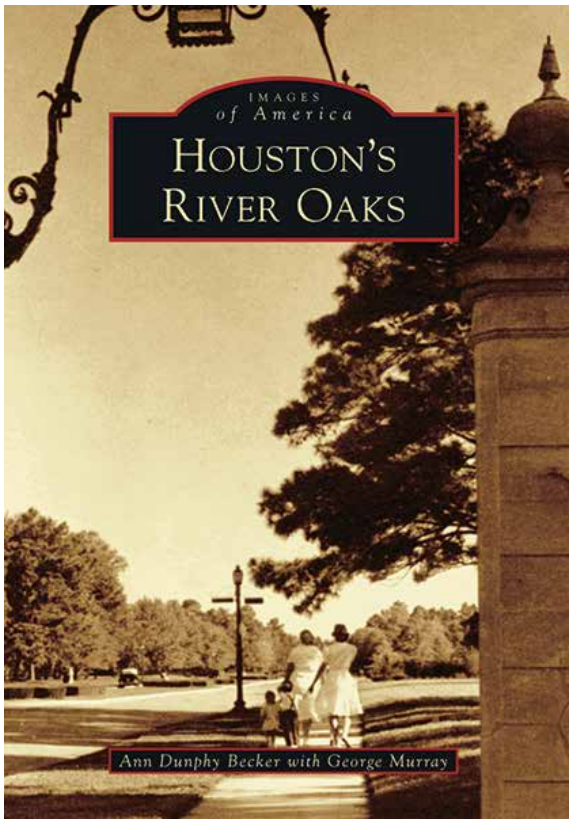
APRIL 12, 2014: The San Jacinto Symposium sponsored by the San Jacinto Battleground Conservancy looks at the Texas Revolution through the eyes of Texas-born Tejanos who fought for independence alongside "newcomers" from the United States and Europe. Speakers are Raul Ramos, Francis Galan, Craig H. Roell, Frank de la Teja, Omar S. Valerio-Jiménez, and Jim Crisp. Visit www.sanjacintoconservancy.com.

APRIL 21, 2014: The San Jacinto Commemorative Ceremony, sponsored by the San Jacinto Battleground Association, will be held at the San Jacinto Monument at 11:00 a.m.

APRIL 26, 2014: The San Jacinto Festival and Battle Re-enactment sponsored by the San Jacinto Museum of History will be held 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Book Review *by Debbie Z. Harwell*

Houston's River Oaks by Ann Becker with George Murray chronicles one of Houston's most famous neighborhoods, the well-to-do suburb that began outside of town in 1924. Will and Mike Hogg and Hugh Potter purchased the land surrounding Country Club Estates and the club to make something "really big, something the city can be proud of." The first section of *Houston's River Oaks* outlines the neighborhood's development, and the second half shares anecdotes about its residents.



As with all Arcadia books, the images tell the story and Becker has selected an interesting array of photographs. Rather than one of River Oaks's wealthy residents, the cover shows two African American domestic workers walking just inside the suburb's gates holding two white children by the hand, giving the reader a sense of what lies inside both the neighborhood and the book.

Becker traces the neighborhood by decades. River Oaks was advertised as ideal for newlyweds in the 1930s; and despite the Depression, the area saw a building boom with residents hosting large parties for their children and entertaining guests like Frank Sinatra and Dorothy Lamour. Clark Gable appeared at his stepdaughter's wedding, giving her a tract of River Oaks land.

Neighborhood families contributed to the war effort in the 1940s, from children selling war stamps to women making bandages to sons serving overseas. By the 1950s, a more festive tone is seen, including one photo of Hugh Roy Cullen who appears to be singing while surrounded by debutants. Women pose on staircases in elaborate gowns as the day's fashion dictated. The final chapter on the 1960s demonstrates how much things had changed through the fashions and faces of new young residents; but some things remained the same, like the African American women serving as nannies.

If you have ever driven by those fabulous homes and wondered who lived there or what they might look like inside, Ann Becker's book offers an interesting peak into their stories.

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