



# 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](http://www.nuez.com).

**S**tanding 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 Eldorado 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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, KLVV 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 KLVV.

*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.”<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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.”<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.”

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