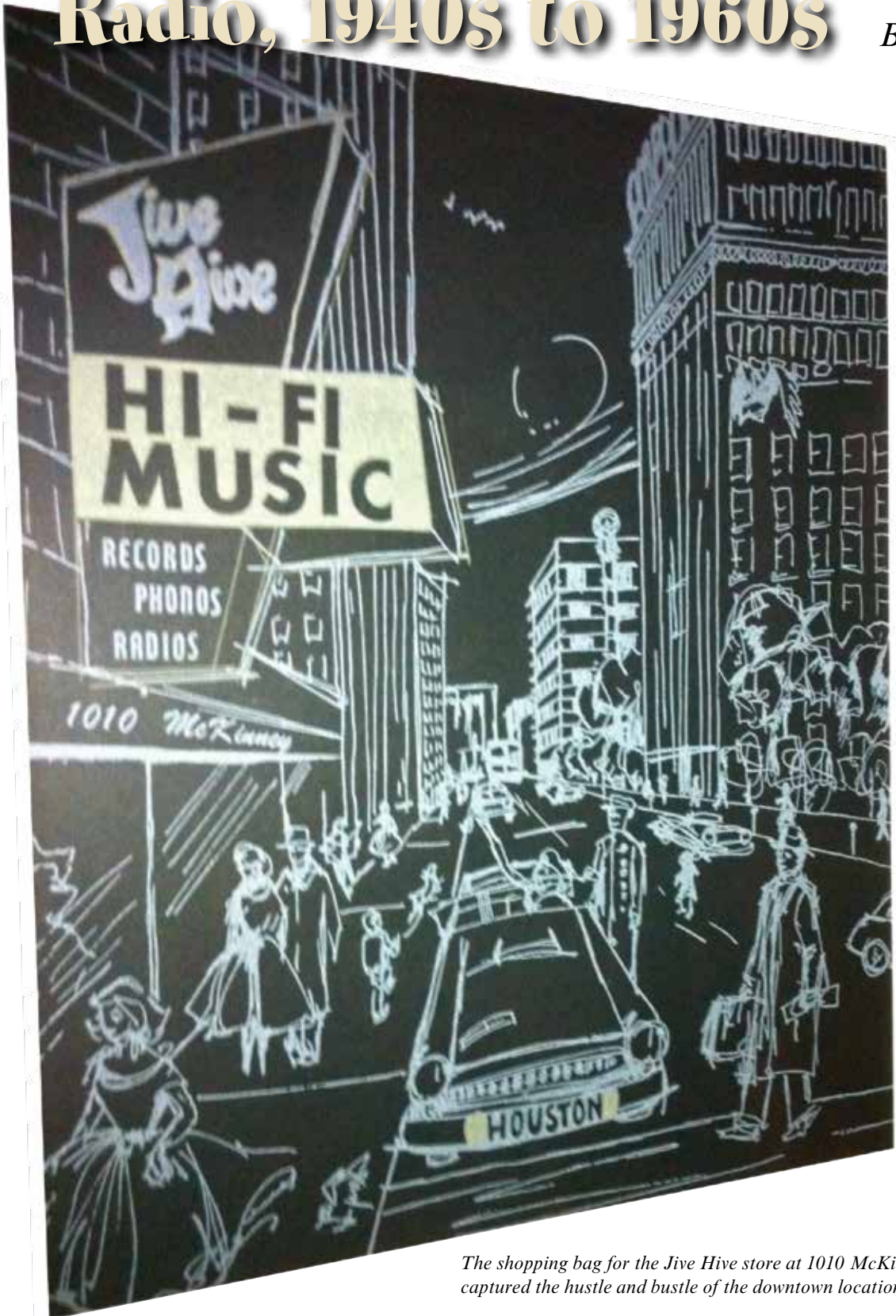


Rockin' and Boppin': Houston's Record Shops and Radio, 1940s to 1960s

By Debbie Z. Harwell



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 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.



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.

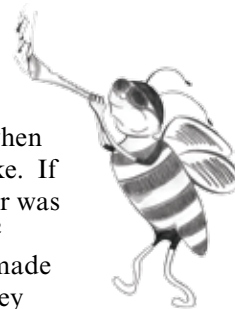
True to its name, the Jive Hive buzzed with activity. Irene's sister, Joy Gould, remembers the place was always full of young people who loved the atmosphere because "everything was lively." As with most record shops around town, a customer could come in with friends and sit down at a turntable to play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

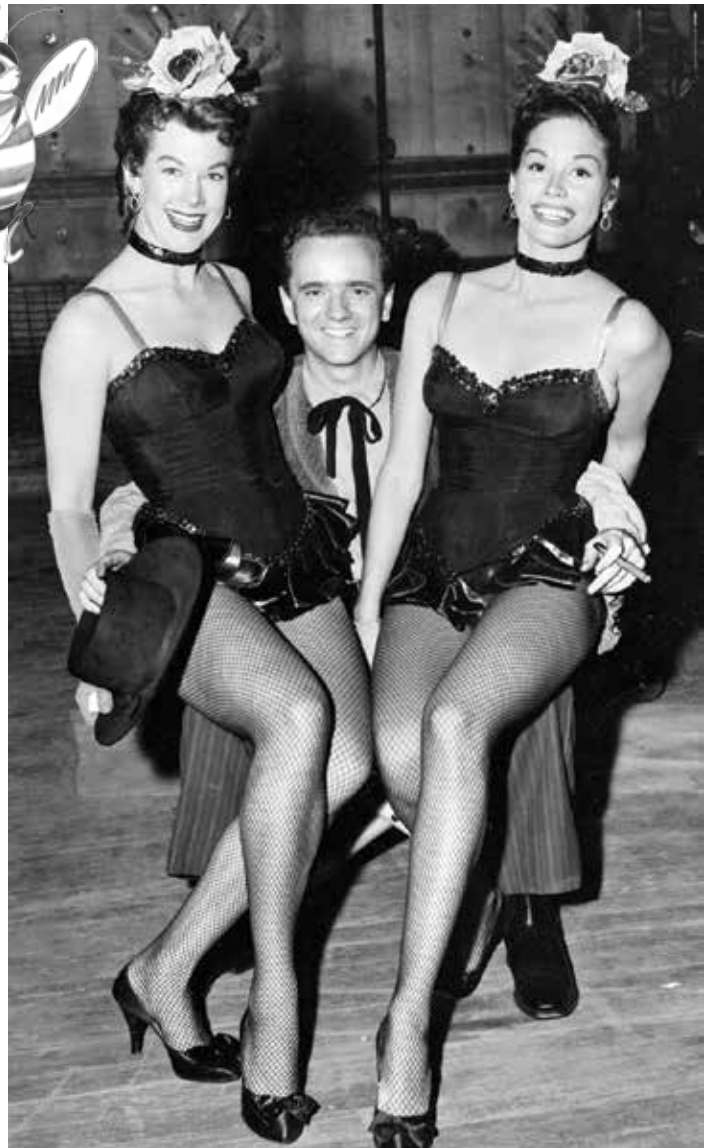
Berlin remembers how music trends shifted in the post-war era locally and nationally. In the 1940s, big bands

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



Bee drawings by
Aaron Goffney.

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.

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 re-

calls; 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, point-



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.

ing 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

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.

Debbie Z. Harwell received her Ph.D. in history from the University of Houston and is the managing editor of *Houston History*.



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.