

# ELDORADO BALLROOM

by Leigh Cutler

Writing during the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes penned these words: "I, too, sing America.... I, too, am America." His poem "I, Too," makes a statement about the inferior position of blacks in a Jim Crow society while looking forward with assurance to a future of national racial equality. At the same time, Hughes seems to emphasize that, despite segregation, people of all backgrounds, not just whites, represented America. The words "I am" resound throughout the twentieth century historical struggle by African Americans to gain equal recognition under the law and in society. In Houston's Third Ward neighborhood,

where the city's largest and most diverse black population lived, residents created a nearly autonomous community built upon the principle of "I am." This fully developed black society allowed businesses, churches, schools, hospitals, and entertainment venues to flourish.

Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz, in *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston*, describe the ways segregation encouraged the growth of a self-contained black Houston community: "Most blacks responded to segregation by turning inward, relying on their own families and communities, creating their own institutions, and avoiding, as much

as possible, contact with the outside white world... In one sense segregation thus stimulated the black community."<sup>1</sup> These institutions met the needs of the community and provided safe spaces for cultural life to exist in a racially segregated urban environment.

One such space was the landmark Eldorado Ballroom, which was representative of the last pinnacle of black culture in Houston before Jim Crow laws dissolved. Appropriating the epithet of Harlem's more famous Savoy Ballroom, which opened in 1926 and where the lindy hop and other jazz dance crazes of the 1920s and 30s originated, the Eldorado billed itself as the

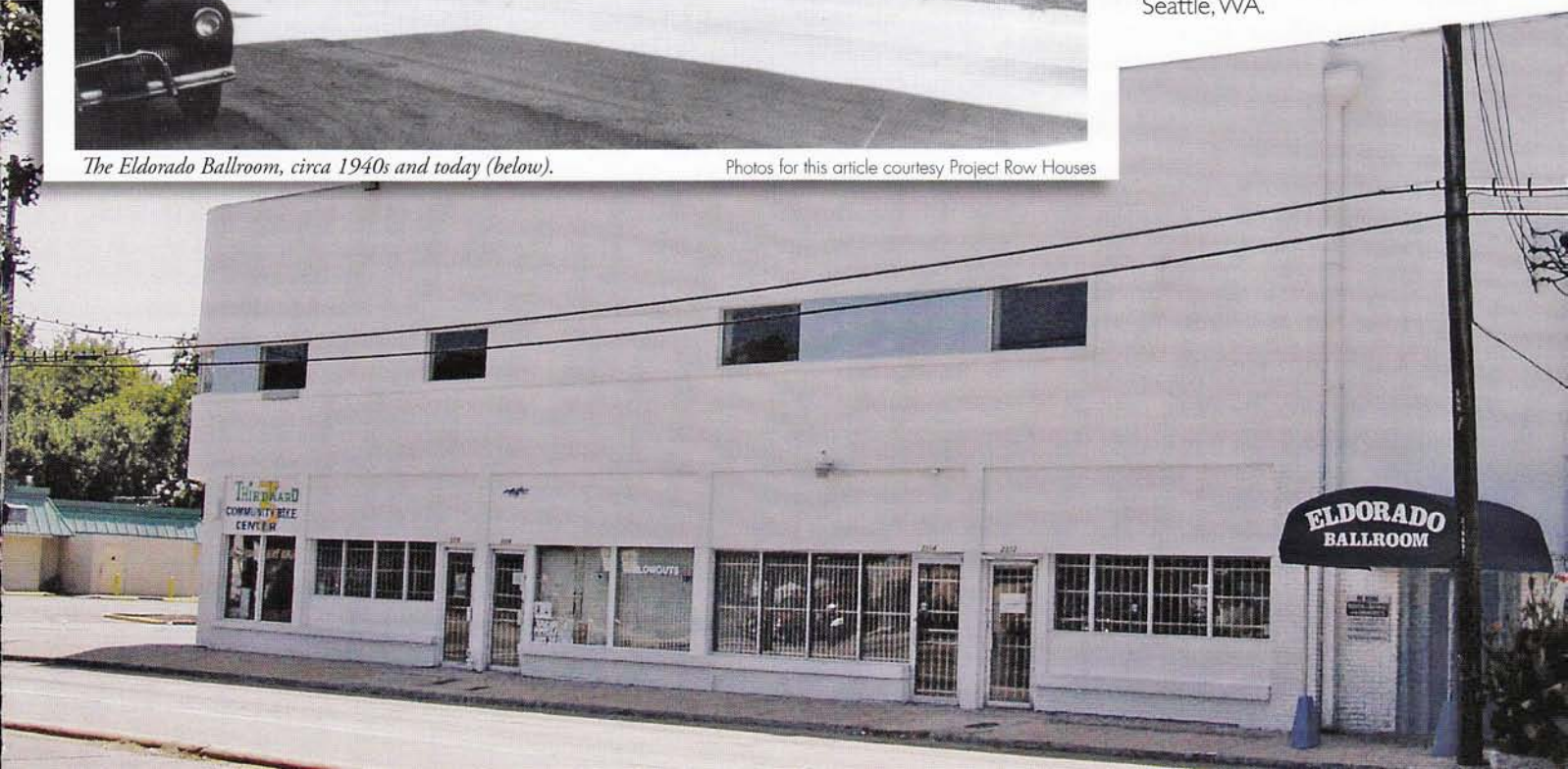
"Home of Happy Feet."<sup>2</sup> This label characterized the venue's reputation as "a special haven for dancers." The dancing that blacks came to the Eldorado to do held distinctive significance because it occurred in such a fashionable, dignified environment.<sup>3</sup> Jackie Beckham, who

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The Eldorado Ballroom, circa 1940s and today (below).

Photos for this article courtesy Project Row Houses





grew up in the Third Ward in the 1940s, recalled that, "most of the people who went to the Eldorado loved to dance. You couldn't do that at the other clubs. They served food and drink at those. You didn't have room to be dancin' in them." She went on to say that the crowd ranged in age from early 20s to 40s and 50s, but despite generational differences, the one thing that the patrons had in common was that they all loved to dance.<sup>4</sup>

Local black newspapers often included regular advertisements and brief articles announcing upcoming acts and events at the Eldorado Ballroom. Aware of the club's unique opportunity as a high-class dance venue, these features sometimes highlighted dancing as a way to lure readers to the Eldorado on particular nights. For example, a 1949 column in *The Informer*, considered to be the oldest black newspaper published west of the Mississippi, reported the scheduled performance of Hollywood saxophone player Charles "Leap Frog" Bennett, ensuring that "Lovers of jitterbugging will delight in Bennett's jump and be bop numbers, yet he can play lots of that soft, sweet mellow dance music which many dancers love."<sup>5</sup>

The "rado," as patrons who frequented the Eldorado Ballroom during its heyday in the 1940s and 50s called it, was for three decades one of Houston's premier showcases for local and national African American musical talent. At the corner of Elgin and Dowling Streets and across the street from the historic Emancipation Park, local black business leaders C.A. and Anna Dupree built the venue as a classy ballroom for African Americans during an era of segregation. Because of its centralized location along Dowling Street, the area's main thoroughfare, and its prominence overlooking the street, as it occupied the Eldorado Building's entire second floor, many considered the ballroom to be the Third Ward's most prestigious focal point.<sup>6</sup> The closing paragraph of a 1956 announcement in *The Informer* about a show by the popular jazz band "The Midnighters" defined the Eldorado as "the most aristocratic, spacious and beautiful in the South West playing only the best in entertainment for your complete evening of pleasure."<sup>7</sup> For many, the space evoked a sense of nobility. Blues vocalist Carolyn Blanchard once said that the Eldorado Ballroom "made us feel like



we were kings and queens. We always held our heads a little higher after leaving the Eldorado."<sup>8</sup> At the same time, it represented a physical symbol of community pride.

The Eldorado Building was a mixed-use development with a storefront of small black-owned businesses on the first floor, including the Walker-Brantley Appliance Company, which at one time was Houston's only black authorized Frigidaire dealer.<sup>9</sup> The ballroom itself was a somewhat upscale, but not totally exclusive, space outside of church where people dressed up to go and where they could socialize with others in their community. "When you went to church, you were very conservative in your dress, but when you went to the Eldorado, you put on your best glittery stuff you had. It was like party time," remembered Beckham.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the Eldorado stood apart from the common juke joints that existed throughout the Third Ward, where people gathered to hear music and dance.<sup>11</sup>

The Duprees established this "class" venue in 1939. The Eldorado was the centerpiece of several profitable enterprises that the couple owned and operated in Houston. After marrying in 1916, Anna and C.A. moved from Galveston to Houston, where their business careers and, later, philanthropic endeavors began. Anna achieved success as a maid and beautician, traveling across the city by streetcar to pursue her work in wealthy white residences. In 1936, she opened her own beauty shop, "Anna's Institute of Health and Beauty," complete with a Turkish bath and massage services.<sup>12</sup> While Anna worked in her shop, Mr. Dupree was a porter and eventually locker room manager at the River Oaks Country Club. Regarding the couple's financial situation, Mrs. Dupree once said, "We went without many of the necessities of life in order to save money." Working as a team, the Duprees put aside most of C.A.'s tips from the club and lived

on his meager salary. Despite hard times during the Great Depression, the couple reportedly saved \$20,000 during the 1920s and 30s. Gradually, they invested in real estate ventures that provided important services to the black community, and which led to the creation of the Eldorado Ballroom.<sup>13</sup>

In Anna Dupree's own words, the Eldorado was a "showcase for the great black entertainers of the era and the launching pad for many show-biz careers."<sup>14</sup> In Houston, black culture and popular black music evolved in the isolated social context of the local African American community, and more specifically, under the roof of the Eldorado Ballroom. Such musical forms included gospel, blues, R&B, jazz, and zydeco, and for many musicians performing at the Eldorado represented the peak of local success. As trumpeter, bandleader, former B.B. King orchestra director, and Houston native Calvin Owens related to Roger Wood, in an interview for his book, *Down in Houston: Bayou City Blues*, "Playing at the Eldorado Ballroom – I mean, that's like saying: Okay, I've made it."<sup>15</sup> Like Owens, other musically talented black Houstonians gained valuable experience as members of the house bands at the ballroom. From this opportunity, some later became internationally famous bandleaders and recording artists.

The Eldorado was much more than simply a musical training ground for local talent. Distinguished Houston bandleaders and horn players such as Milton Larkin, I.H. "Ike" Smalley, and Arnett Cobb directed big jazz and swing bands that performed at the historic venue. These house orchestras enhanced the ballroom's aura as a classy place, and they featured musicians who provided instrumental backing for locally produced floor shows (where performers took over the dance floor, the band played from the stage, and patrons watched from their tables), as well



as for touring artists. The Eldorado thrived during the big-band heyday of the 1940s, playing host to such famous entertainers as Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Louis Armstrong. In the 1950s, and continuing on into the 1960s, it was the home of rhythm and blues, welcoming some of the biggest names in the entertainment industry, including Della Reese, James Brown, Little Richard, B.B. King, and Fats Domino.<sup>16</sup>

Before desegregation in the 1960s, racial separation in Houston and the South inhibited the mobility of jazz and blues musicians, although less so than it did for most occupations. The popularity of this type of music, among both black and white audiences, combined with a generally higher racial tolerance in the arts, allowed controlled crossings of the color line to occur.<sup>17</sup> As Conrad Johnson, a leader of an Eldorado house band before touring with several groups, noted, "Musicians have always broken the barriers."<sup>18</sup> In Houston, blacks who performed at exclusively white venues generally were restricted to the dressing rooms between acts and were prohibited from using the lobbies when entering or leaving buildings. Clubs like the Eldorado, however, provided black musicians with an atmosphere free from racial tensions.<sup>19</sup> Artists who routinely performed for all-white crowds modified black music culture to accommodate this different audience. In doing so, this culture, which embodied a sense of community pride and that people celebrated in the Third Ward at the Eldorado Ballroom, lost to assimilation much of its unique character.

"A community good time place" is how former radio DJ and Eldorado emcee Skipper Lee Frazier described the ballroom in a recent interview and, as Allan Turner noted in a feature article in the *Houston Chronicle*, the venue "transcended its role as a nightclub."<sup>20</sup> Over the years, the Duprees hosted many events there to raise money for community projects, such as the Negro Child Center, an orphanage for black children and the couple's first philanthropic undertaking. Additionally, a fundraising function at the Eldorado Ballroom was instrumental in improving the pay of black teachers. The club owners held dances there to collect donations to supplement the meager salary that the teachers received.<sup>21</sup> These charitable dances featured the music of local headliners, such as an event benefiting crippled children and

showcasing I.H. Smalley and his orchestra, which *The Informer* advertised to its readers in 1949.<sup>22</sup> The Duprees and other affluent blacks in Houston formed a bridge between the poor and the financially prosperous. They never forgot where they came from and they worked to better the lives of thousands of African Americans in their city. These individuals found opportunities to secure land and businesses within a segregated society and then to use their wealth to provide needed services for blacks. Their work exemplifies the process through which Houston's black population achieved greater racial autonomy by generating both the leadership and the funding necessary for community building.<sup>23</sup>



The Eldorado also held weekly talent shows and sock hops for teenagers. These events demonstrate the venue's function as a cultural institution that welcomed various levels of the black community. On weekday afternoons or Sunday evenings, middle and high school students competed by singing and dancing in talent shows. Three African American high schools existed in Houston during the Eldorado's prominent years: Phyllis Wheatley, Jack Yates, and Booker T. Washington High Schools. Yates and Wheatley had active marching bands; therefore, a rivalry existed between the schools in both music and football. According to saxophonist Arnett Cobb, who was from Houston and toured internationally, the unofficial competition caused musically inclined students to work even harder at their talent, practicing to be the best. As a result, outstanding musicians came from both schools.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the Eldorado's talent shows furthered this drive toward musical excellence, all the while encouraging young people to pursue opportunities that had roots in a cohesive black culture. Roger Wood pointed out that

the kids in the talent competitions might perform on the same stage that Ray Charles would occupy later that same night.<sup>25</sup> Such proximity to musical greatness and fame was likely inspiring to black youth, sending them a message of limitless possibility that began as close to home as the spaces that defined their own community.

Sometimes on Sundays from around 4:00 in the afternoon until 8:00, young people could attend matinee dances, or sock hops. No alcohol was available, and these instances represented the only time that teenagers were legitimate patrons. Popular radio personality, Skipper Lee Frazier, or "Daddy Deepthroat," often acted as emcee and disc jockey at the Eldorado's youth functions. At times, he hosted live afternoon broadcasts on Third Ward-based KCOH, the oldest African American owned and operated radio station in Texas, where he worked as a DJ for 22 years.<sup>26</sup> Kids from other wards often rode the bus from their neighborhoods to the Eldorado because such youth-centered entertainment was rare and was available elsewhere only at the YMCA and YWCA. Moreover, the opportunity to attend a social function at a club normally exclusive to adults was probably more attractive to black teenagers than the historically community-center atmosphere of the Ys. Social and entertainment venues for blacks, similar to the Eldorado, existed in other wards, such as the Bronze Peacock in the Fifth Ward, but because it offered elite chef-created dinners and was routinely accessible to black youth, the Third Ward venue stood apart as more of a family-friendly, community institution.

Additionally, the ballroom provided a centralized space for black social clubs to meet and stage special events. Some social clubs, like the Amboy Dukes Social Club, advertised their functions in *The Informer*, highlighting the date and time, ticket prices, and guest performers. Former Third Ward resident, Jackie Beckham, however, does not remember spending much time reading about upcoming Eldorado shows and events in the newspaper. She remembers that, "We spent most of the time just saying, 'Girl, do you know who's going to be at the 'rado on Sunday?'" According to Beckham, news about performances came mainly by word of mouth or from flyers posted on neighborhood telephone poles.<sup>27</sup> Many of the features that *The Informer* published about such gatherings



at the Eldorado in the 40s and 50s emphasized common identity, an empowering characteristic of black culture and society under segregation. For example, in a short article recapping the annual ball of a local men's fraternal organization, the Eldorado Club, the concluding statement reads, "The El Dorado club's ball was one of the loveliest of the season and it served to bring Houstonians closer to each other."<sup>28</sup> Undoubtedly the article is suggesting that the occasion brought black Houston residents closer to one another. By not separating African American Houstonians from any other Houstonians in its description of the ball, the newspaper indicates that members of the black community were secure in the self-contained society they had established. In other words, Houston was a city that belonged to them as much as it did to any other racial group that called it home.

Another *Informer* news item from the 1940s featured a photograph of the winners of the Franklin Beauty School style show, celebrating their accomplishments at the Eldorado Ballroom. The Franklin Beauty School, which found a permanent home in Houston in 1935, was one of the first private cosmetology schools to receive a license in the state of Texas. It opened many doors for African American women to pursue professional careers as trained, skilled beauticians. A black-owned family business since its beginnings, the school is still in operation today. Similar to the description of the fraternal club's ball, the caption under the style show winners' picture identifies the Eldorado as a place "where good friends get together."<sup>29</sup> Again, the ballroom's distinctive quality is evident. The space offered a pleasant community environment where the clientele could expect dignity and respect from other patrons, and where celebrations and social fellowship were commonplace.

Many blacks who lived through segregation recalled it as a time when families were closely knit and when neighbors kept an eye out for each other. In discussing her experience of growing up in Houston's Third Ward, Jackie Beckham mentioned the common practice of friends helping raise others' children. Her mother, in particular, relied on these people for such support. "It was a community where whatever you did, good or bad, Mom was going to know about it before the sun went down."<sup>30</sup> The



*Big band at the Eldorado Ballroom*

work week was difficult, but people looked forward to the weekend as a chance to socialize with friends and family, attend Sunday worship services, and enjoy other diversions – such as dancing to bands at the Eldorado.<sup>31</sup> Beckham reminisced about being a teenager and walking a few blocks from her house to attend Sunday matinee dances there with her girlfriends. This type of social activity was an exciting distraction from routine responsibilities at home and school, and therefore provided the girls with gossip stories for the remainder of the week.<sup>32</sup>

Carroll Parrott Blue, who also grew up in the Third Ward, lived in the same house until she left for college. During those years, which coincided with the heydays of the Eldorado Ballroom, she remembered that her neighborhood was a quiet and safe part of town.<sup>33</sup> Blues singer Jewel Brown, whose career took her on a regular touring circuit with Louis Armstrong, graduated from Yates High School and started out singing at the Eldorado to the piano music of her brother, Theodore Brown. They lived so close to the club that they walked there from home, with their mother serving as chaperone. "Those were the good ol' days when you could sleep on your porch and not have to worry about anything," Brown reported about her childhood days in the Third Ward.<sup>34</sup>

The area's character began to change in the 1960s and early 1970s, however, leading to the decline and eventual closing of the Eldorado. Beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, the city's black popu-

lation experienced rapid growth. A dramatic increase of more than 400 percent took place between 1940 and 1980. While the traditional black communities, including the Third Ward, absorbed some of the newcomers, most of the growth occurred outside these historic neighborhoods. New, generally more attractive black enclaves developed, especially in the southern part of the city. Desegregation in Houston began to take shape around this same time period. As a result, more and more blacks patronized white-owned businesses outside their immediate neighborhoods and new suburban shopping malls. This transition negatively impacted black businesses.<sup>35</sup> Addressing this socioeconomic and residential dispersal of blacks to other parts of the city, acclaimed guitarist and Eldorado performer Roy Gaines commented, "After years and years of being denied the opportunity to visit certain theaters, restaurants, stores, banks, and what-have-you, do you think black people wanted to stay put...?"<sup>36</sup> With desegregation and the breakdown of overt public displays of racial discrimination, political, economic, and social opportunity improved for blacks, but the cohesive culture that thrived in the Third Ward and at the Eldorado suffered. As Roger Wood noted, "one of the great ironies of the civil rights movement is that as we made progress, some of these wonderful neighborhoods suffered economically."<sup>37</sup>

Although the decline of the Eldorado Ballroom is largely attributable to the economic setbacks that desegregation triggered for black-owned businesses



along Dowling Street, as well as the demise of the self-contained black culture existing in the Third Ward, other factors undoubtedly contributed to the club's downfall. First of all, as times changed, so did popular musical tastes. In the 1960s, many of the younger African Americans began to abandon blues culture for more progressive sounds; they associated the older jazz and blues traditions with their parents' generation and life in an oppressive society.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the rise of automobile culture paralleled desegregation, and parking space at the Eldorado was scarce. According to John Green, road manager for big band star Bobby Bland, "Back when the Eldorado was jumping, people used to ride the bus and get off right on the corner [of Elgin and Dowling Streets]. But then after the Korean War and everybody started getting cars, there was nowhere to park. They used to park on Elgin, on both sides, and around the corner. And those school kids would go and jack the cars up, take the tires off, and strip 'em! So that went on and helped kill the Eldorado."<sup>39</sup> The financial stability that many African American Houstonians gained from the economic opportunities available to them in a self-sustaining black society permitted possession of personal automobiles. Ironically, it was this increase in car ownership that factored into the decline of a key cultural institution, which owed its success to the once tight-knit black community surrounding it.

Finally, perhaps a major reason for decline of the Eldorado Ballroom was the emergence of militant black activism and police involvement in the Third Ward. The People's Party II, the local Black Panther affiliate, maintained its headquarters at 2828 Dowling, just around the corner from the ballroom. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was probably the most famous expression of the Black Power movement and the most widely known black militant political organization of the late 1960s.<sup>40</sup> In his study, *Race and the Houston Police Department, 1930-1990*, Dwight Watson asserts that as the civil rights movement gained momentum, blacks in Houston began to increase their demands for legal, political, and economic change.<sup>41</sup>

One major incident that contributed to the rise in tension between police and the Houston black community occurred on July 26, 1970, when an HPD assault team killed People's Party II chairman,

21-year-old Carl Bernard Hampton, and wounded four other activists. No policemen suffered injuries. The Dowling Street area had been tense for several days, since a week earlier police entered the activists' headquarters and seized rifles, ammunition, and clothing. This spot was the scene of nearly 100 gunfire shots in a confrontation that started when police arrested two teenaged party members for pointing weapons at the officers after they stopped the boys in the street. The HPD's intimidation methods and repressive reaction to black activism made the Dowling Street area of the Third Ward a somewhat fearful, unpleasant space for the older, middle class blacks who once frequented the Eldorado Ballroom. Most likely, these particular patrons were uninterested in revolutionary ideas and police confrontations, and therefore chose to avoid an entertainment venue with that sort of activity surrounding it.<sup>42</sup>

In his book, Watson argues that Third Ward rioting "permanently altered the city's political and social culture, as more blacks rejected police domination and white political control."<sup>43</sup> In response to the highly political context of the time, the leading local black newspaper, *The Informer*, greatly decreased its coverage of entertainment features and advertisements, including those about the Eldorado Ballroom. Beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the 1970s, the editors concentrated more on political activity and news stories than on social and cultural items of interest. For example, an op/ed-style column in a 1970 edition of the paper responded to the division between members of the black community in the aftermath of the death of People's Party II leader Hampton. In its closing remarks, the article proclaims to readers, "We believe that the various Black factions in Houston are going to have to get together, sit down and work out accommodations and stand before the common enemy united."<sup>44</sup> The timing of this shift in approach to reporting makes sense, considering the near non-existence of the self-contained black culture and society from segregation era Houston. Focusing on activism in a newly desegregated city seemed to take precedence over social diversions.

The Eldorado Ballroom closed to the public in the early 1970s and, until recently, the second floor lay empty for years, but was available for lease as office space. In

1999, Herbert Finkelstein, the oil tycoon who bought the property as an investment after Anna Dupree died, donated the Eldorado and 17-lot block bordered by Elgin, Dowling, Bastrop, and Stuart Streets to Project Row Houses.<sup>45</sup> This local neighborhood-based art and cultural organization is located in the Third Ward, just blocks away from the Eldorado, on a site of 22 abandoned shotgun houses (c. 1930). The non-profit group's mission is to connect the work of artists with the revitalization of the community. Today, the renovated Eldorado Ballroom plays a significant role in realizing that mission. On May 17, 2003, following restoration efforts to return the building to its elite status among Houston clubs, Project Row Houses opened the doors to the Eldorado again, hosting the first major event there in more than 30 years.<sup>46</sup> The fundraising gala brought in \$75,000 to support continuing renovations. The facility now functions as a special performance venue and a meeting site available for rental, while maintaining small-business tenants on the building's street level.<sup>47</sup>

Longtime Third Ward resident, professional saxophonist, and 30-year veteran as a Houston public school music teacher and band director, Conrad Johnson used to take the stage at the Eldorado with his own band. When asked for his opinion on the revitalization of the ballroom, Johnson commented, "Bringing the Eldorado back to life is a beautiful idea. You talk to a lot of people, and they're negative. They say you never can bring back the Eldorado the way it was in the old days. But, you know, maybe we can bring back something that's just as important for today's times."<sup>48</sup> Although the reborn Eldorado differs considerably from the club that thrived in the 1940s and 50s, its owners' intended purpose—to create a community haven for black cultural and musical expression—remains the same. For many, the music at the Eldorado was much more than entertainment. It was a source of freedom, an escape from problems, and a way to express one's soul.<sup>49</sup> Just as the jazz and blues songs of Harlem performers in the 1920s inspired Langston Hughes' poetic declaration, "I, too, am," the Eldorado Ballroom, as a space for music, dancing, and community activity for more than 30 years, established a cultural identity and the sense of "I am" for blacks in Houston. [C]