

Take Note

Memorable Music Venues in Chicago

Keith Helt, Crown Family Philanthropies

Hey music lovers. If you visit Chicago for *ARCHIVES 360°*, August 22–27, 2011, you will find a thriving music scene. But first read about some former venues that got the party started.

Over the course of the 20th century, music fans elevated a few select music venues in the United States to a position of reverence based on their reputation and their histories. The world of jazz has the Five Spot, Slug's Saloon, the Village Vanguard, Birdland, and Village Gate all in New York. In the world of rock there's the Fillmore and 924 Gilman Street in the Bay Area, the Whiskey A Go Go in Los Angeles, Emo's in Austin, CBGB's and the Mudd Club in New York. While the majority of the most legendary musical spaces are found on the coasts, Chicago has its share of legendary venues that grew out of its various, vibrant music scenes. In honor of SAA's 75th anniversary, we'll look at some of Chicago's most important clubs, ballrooms, and hole in the walls from the past 75 years. All of which are no longer with us.

The middle of the 20th century was a time of massive musical revolution, jazz was constantly evolving, experimenting and re-inventing itself. When swing slowly transformed into be-bop, Chicago was at the forefront and the Southside was the place to be. Forty-seventh and Sixty-third streets in the neighborhoods of Bronzeville and Woodlawn respectively were meccas for music fans who wanted to check out the new sounds. Cutting sessions, where be-bop musicians would jam, show off, and learn new techniques, would last until early in the morning. Musicians from outside of Chicago would find out what was going on in the city and local musicians would get a chance to play with touring luminaries.

There was the **Sutherland Lounge** on the first floor of the Sutherland Hotel at 4659 South Drexel Boulevard. The lounge had plush carpet, crystal chandeliers and a large square bar with a raised stage in the middle of it. The elegant room saw the likes of Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Roland Kirk and Louis Armstrong grace its stage.

The Cotton Club at 63rd and Cottage Grove always seemed to have a jam session going on, night or day. Sun Ra rehearsed his band here when he was still known as Sonny Blount and on any given night you might see Johnny Griffin, Von Freeman, Wilbur Ware, Gene Ammons, Clifford Jordan or Eddie Harris playing.

As the fifties progressed so did Chicago's jazz esthetic, and by the early 60s a new sound was coming out of Chicago that was based on a way of doing things more than a specific sound. Using jazz as a starting point, the younger musicians also drew on 20th century avant-garde composition, rhythm and blues, and a variety of personal influences to create their new musical language.

Trumpet player Kelan Phil Cohran founded the **Affro Arts Theatre** at 39th and Drexel in 1967 as a community center that featured free weekly cultural events and concerts by the Artistic Heritage Ensemble, Gwendolyn Brooks, Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, Eartha Kitt and others. Although it only lasted only until 1970, it provided a place for the young musicians to experiment and work out their ideas. **Transitions East**, a venue, health food store and juice bar at 82nd and Cottage Grove, that was founded by the Hebrew Israelite community, also provided a crucial space for Chicago's young jazz musicians in the 1970s. The Pharoahs, Amina Claudine Myers, Muhal Richard Abrams, Kahil El'Zabar, and Ari Brown all played at the space.

Sadly by 1970, almost no prominent music venues remained anywhere on the Southside and the thriving musical landscape disappeared. Where there were once grand ballrooms, intimate clubs and art spaces, there continues to be a massive void. One of the few bright spots was the **Velvet Lounge** founded by prominent saxophonist and Chicagoan Fred Anderson in 1982. The club quickly became a hotbed of musical activity and remained so until its closing in the fall of 2010.

Punk rock exploded out of New York and England in the mid 70s—not counting all the various *proto-punk* bands and influences that came before. The West Coast then adapted it to its own style and needs. In Chicago something weird happened, though, no one knew what to do with punk. It was more about how you made the music, as opposed to what the music sounded like; so Chicago's punk and alternative scene was smaller and a bit more anarchic, and anything went. While New York's punk rock scene achieved critical mass and endured, Chicago's early punk scene flared briefly and then sputtered out. Most of the early venues were equally short lived.

Chicago's first punk rock venue was a small gay bar called **La Mere Vipere** that began playing punk records and then booking local bands. The venue lasted for less than a year as a home for punk before closing due to a fire. La Mere Vipere was located at 2132 North Halsted, which in 1977 was a sketchy place to be.

After La Mere Vipere closed, the punks moved south to **O'Banion's**, which became Chicago's main punk venue. Chicago's River North is not a place that you would currently expect a punk rock dive bar to be, but that's where O'Banion's was located, at the corner of Clark and Erie. Local bands like Naked Raygun, Articles of Faith, Strike Under and The Dadaistics all played here as did out of towners such as the Dead Kennedys, T.S.O.L and the Replacements.

A few miles north at Clark and Sheffield, the club **Tuts** began hosting local bands as well as national and international bands such as The Cramps, Bauhaus, DNA, Echo and the Bunnymen,

Black Flag and The Fall. This venue became **The Avalon** in 1987, and soldiered on for a few more years as an alternative music venue. The Smashing Pumpkins played their first show here as a three piece with a drum machine on the small second stage.

Chicago is known internationally as a birthplace of house music which has its musical antecedents in disco, soul and funk. The origins of the genre are shrouded in apocryphal stories, arguments, and facts that have become legends. The basic story is that a DJ named Frankie Knuckles was hired away from his old residency at a New York dance club and started spinning records at a newly opened club in Chicago that was going to try and emulate the New York scene. The club was called the Warehouse and the unique sound that Frankie Knuckles developed became known as *house* because it was the type of music that was played at the Warehouse. The music became popular in dance clubs across the country and was soon exported to Europe. Of course there's lots of contradictory information and this is just the tip of the historical iceberg.

The holiest of holy sites is of course **The Warehouse** which opened in 1976 at 116 South Clinton. The Warehouse had a few different locations throughout its brief life—1400 South Michigan Avenue, 555 West Adams and finally its most famous home, 206 South Jefferson a small building in the West Loop. After it closed in 1983, two new clubs emerged: **The Power Plant**, where Frankie Knuckles continued to DJ and the atmosphere continued to be a bit more refined, and **The Music Box**.

Originally located at 1632 South Indiana, The Music Box moved to 326 North Michigan Avenue after its original building was condemned. Where the Power Plant was more traditional the Music Box focused more on the experimental house sounds of its resident DJ, Ron Hardy, who would mix reel to reel tape manipulation with his record spinning. The crowd at the Music Box was also more flamboyant and dramatic in their fashion sense and dance style. The Power Plant and the Music Box were both closed by 1988 and Chicago's club scene began to fade into history.

Music in Chicago is alive, well, and awaiting your visit in August. For information about the current music scene—jazz, blues, rock, rap, and more—see the Host Committee Blog [here](#).