If you wanted some live entertainment in Cleveland, “you could always find it,” said longtime Cleveland jazz enthusiast Neimiah “Chief” Story. “There was never any dearth of music in Cleveland. You could leave one corner, where they had a little four or five-piece band, and walk a block or two and find another one.”

Nightclubs that present live jazz seem to come and go almost as quickly as the seasons. Over the years there have been thousands in Cleveland. But there have been some that continued to present jazz for years and some remain vivid in the memories of musicians and fans for the outstanding artists they offered.

From the late 1940s to the mid-1960s, there were at least 15 Cleveland clubs presenting many of the biggest national names in jazz, frequently for engagements that lasted for a week or two.

Veteran Cleveland trumpeter Kenny Davis recalled that Cleveland’s University Circle area in the early 1960s “was like a smaller version of New York’s 52nd Street.” He said, “You would always see musicians walking along the streets with their instruments and you’d see well-dressed white people walking up and down Euclid Avenue. Nobody would ever bother them because they knew they were there to play and to listen to the music.”

Cleveland’s rich tradition of live jazz began in the 1920s and it continues today, although in a somewhat different form, mainly because of the economics of presenting live music.

Golden Pheasant Restaurant

For some reason, Chinese restaurants were among the first to present live jazz - not just in Cleveland, but across the country. In the 1920s, the Bamboo Gardens, a Chinese restaurant at East 88th and Euclid, featured a dance band led by Emerson Gill.

But the best known Chinese restaurant in Cleveland to present jazz was the Golden Pheasant next door to the Winton Hotel on Prospect Avenue just east of East 9th Street. The Austin Wylie Orchestra played at the Golden Pheasant for years. Members of his band in the late 1920s included such future national star musicians as Artie Shaw, Claude Thornhill and Tony Pastor.

Bunny Berigan played with the Hal Kemp band at the Golden Pheasant in 1930.

In the early 1930s, Red Nichols, who had become a national name recording with his “Five Pennies,” played at the Golden Pheasant and originated a series of national radio broadcasts from the Prospect Avenue restaurant.

Cedar Gardens

Another spot that began as a Chinese restaurant became a longtime favorite spot for jazz. Veteran Cleveland saxophonist Andy Anderson recalled going to the restaurant, then called the Butterfly Inn, in the late 1920s and early ‘30s. “After parties and school proms,” said Anderson, “we would go to the Chinese restaurant (at East 97th and Cedar) to get something to eat.”
The owner, Jacob Hecht, hired a cook from Pittsburgh named Deering. Years later, Deering became the operator of one of the most successful party centers and catering services in Cleveland.

Anderson said, “Hecht had a piano sitting there in the corner and he got Rose Murphy to play. Somebody gave him an idea. He said, ‘Look, you gotta great big basement. Why not make it into a nightclub.’ Hecht opened up that cellar door and that was the entrance into the basement. He made a nightclub out of it.” He called his new nightclub Cedar Gardens. It opened in 1934.

The club soon featured a seven-piece band led by Marion Sears, the brother of Al Sears, who later spent years playing with the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Members of that early Cedar Gardens band were Anderson, Horace Adams, Bobby Smith, Buster Harding (who later composed “9:20 Special”), James Peck and Francis Williams (who later played with Duke Ellington). Later members of the Marion Sears Orchestra at Cedar Gardens included Earle Warren, Freddie Webster, Tadd Dameron and Benny Bailey.

Cedar Gardens became Cleveland’s version of Harlem’s Cotton Club, with a band, a full floor show, dancers and singers. At the peak of its popularity, Anderson said Cedar Gardens was presenting shows seven nights a week.

While the club was located in a black neighborhood of Cleveland, it, like New York’s Cotton Club, attracted many white customers. Trumpeter Earl Douthitt said, “If it hadn’t been for the white trade, they would have closed up. The white people came around in their cars and by cab.”

Cedar Gardens flourished in the late 1930s and early ’40s. But, John Mosely, who grew up on Cedar Avenue, said, “For some reason, it didn’t fare too well in the late ’40s.” Douthitt said some customers were getting beaten up and their cars stolen. “That killed the business,” he said, but Cedar Gardens continued to feature local jazz groups until the late 1960s when it closed.

**Elite Club**

Just across the street from Cedar Gardens (at East 97th and Cedar) was another nightclub that featured jazz. It was called the Elite Club.

Anderson remembered, “Phil Taylor had the bar on the corner upstairs. He’d have ten-piece bands up there and floor shows. The floor shows went until three o’clock in the morning.”

Pianist Al Lerner, who later played with the Harry James Orchestra, remembered hearing trumpeter Freddie Webster playing at The Elite Club. Lerner said, “They called it “The E-Light Club.”

Cleveland trumpeter Benny Bailey, younger than Webster, said he played there as a teenager with a group called the Counts of Rhythm.

Douthitt recalled, “All them big time gamblers and everybody used to come by the Elite Club and Cedar Gardens at one time or another.”

Years later, Douthitt, who as a boy sold newspapers at the corner of 97th and Cedar, still remembered the crowds at Cedar Gardens and the Elite Club.

**Club Rendezvous**

A few years later, next door to Cedar Gardens, Caesar Dameron, a musicians’ union official and brother of Tadd Dameron, opened a club called the Club Rendezvous. Some said it was the headquarters of Caesar’s numbers operation. But it was also a popular spot for live jazz.

Veteran musician Byron Smith recalled, “This was one of the main jazz clubs. Everybody used to come through there, everybody you can name, all the top stars.”

Neimiah “Chief” Story said The Club Rendezvous was a popular spot for big bands as well as small groups. Story remembered seeing the Lionel Hampton band at the Rendezvous.

Club Rendezvous was also the launching pad for many young local musicians. Trumpeter Bailey and his boyhood friend, saxophonist Willie Smith, who later arranged for Lionel Hampton, played there with the Counts of Rhythm.

In the 1950s, Caesar Dameron’s brother, Tadd, had a club called Dameron’s Hut at East 79th and Wade Park.
Kenny Davis, a teenager who lived nearby at the time, recalled, “I was too young to go inside, but I sat outside and listened to the music. The door was open so you could hear them. I remember Joe Alexander, who played tenor saxophone, put a sign, written in crayon on cardboard – ‘Fifty dollars to anybody who can blow me off the bandstand.’”

Turf Club
Also at East 97th and Cedar was a spot called the Turf Club. That’s where a 19-year-old Wilberforce College student from Cleveland named Rose Murphy began singing and playing the piano in 1933. At times, when she got the lyrics mixed up, she chirped, “Chi chi.” She was soon known as “The Chi Chi Girl.” The device became her trademark as she appeared at a variety of Cleveland clubs and moved on to New York and Los Angeles in the 1940s and appeared frequently with bassist Slam Stewart. Her record, “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love” sold 2.3 million copies.

Murphy married Edward Matthews, a onetime waiter at the Cleveland Athletic Club, who became her business manager and later, president of a record company in New York City.

Rose Murphy last appeared in Cleveland in 1986 when she sang for the opening of the new Hilton Cleveland South hotel. She died November 16, 1989 at a nursing home in College Point, New York. She was 75.

Majestic Hotel
At East 55th and Central Avenue, the Majestic Hotel was the African-American hotel in Cleveland during the long period when Negroes were not permitted to stay in the major downtown hotels. Touring black entertainers, including many jazz artists, stayed at the Majestic when they came to Cleveland. Among the hotel guests in the 1940s were heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis and Indians pitcher Satchel Paige. It was almost automatic that the Majestic presented live jazz in its nightclub.

Andy Anderson remembered, “I opened that up in 1931 when it was the Furnace Room. Bassist Red Callender played in the house band at the Furnace Room in 1934 and ’35. Later, said Anderson, they changed the name to the Heat Wave. It closed down and later reopened as the Rose Room.”

The Rose Room was the site of Cleveland’s most memorable jam sessions. Pianist Duke Jenkins led the house band in the Rose Room from 1952 until 1957 and played six nights a week. “Every Monday from five o’clock in the morning until ten, we had what we called ‘The Blue Monday Party,’ a jam session that attracted large crowds. Jenkins remembered, “We would work Sunday nights and go up in the hotel and sleep for a couple of hours before getting up for the Blue Monday Parties. He said, “People were lined up outside at five o’clock in the morning to come in. You couldn’t get a seat because we had all the celebrities who were working in different clubs and they would come and perform.”

Among them were Joe Williams, Ben Webster, Sonny Rollins, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Kenny Clarke and Nancy Wilson. When she was still unknown, Jenkins said, “She came into a Blue Monday Party and sang with..."
us. People went crazy because she was so good.”

Later, when she had become a national celebrity, Jenkins was singing one of her songs one night. He had his eyes closed and heard someone say, “Would you mind if I sang the second chorus?” It was Nancy Wilson standing there in front of my piano!”

Another participant in the Blue Monday jam sessions was pianist Erroll Garner. “He came in to sit in with us, said Jenkins. “He was fantastic!”

While the Majestic Hotel was a black hotel located in a black neighborhood, its nightclub also attracted white audiences. “Sunday nights,” said Jenkins, “most of the judges and their wives were there for dinner. The dance floor was packed all the time.”

A member of Jenkins’ five-piece house band at the Rose Room was bassist Junior Raglin who had played with the Duke Ellington Orchestra from 1941 until 1945. When Ellington was staying at the Majestic, he called Jenkins and invited him to have lunch with him. “He wanted to talk about Raglin,” said Jenkins. “He wanted to find out how he was doing.” According to Jenkins, Ellington told him, “You’ve done more with Junior than anything I could do.”

“Just the fact that Ellington knew who I was,” said Jenkins years later, “was one of the big thrills of my life.”

The Rose Room “was quite a place,” remembered Jenkins. “We don’t have any places like that any more.” The Majestic was torn down years ago but, years later, Jenkins said, “Every time we drive down there, we look at the corner and still think about the Majestic and the Rose Room.”

**Theatrical Grill**

At 711 Vincent Avenue downtown, the Theatrical was not only Cleveland’s longest running jazz nightclub, where almost all the jazz greats performed, it was also the city’s best known and most colorful meeting, eating and drinking spot for more than half a century.

The Theatrical was the anchor of “Short Vincent,” a 485-foot street nestled amid the tall buildings of Euclid and Superior Avenues and East 9th and East 6th Streets.

As early as 1885, there was a music hall at the site later occupied by the Theatrical. In 1913, Isadore Weinberger opened a steak and chop house called Korman’s on Vincent. It was a hangout for sports and show biz types until 1967. In the 1920s, travelers would spill out the back door of the palatial old Hollenden Hotel looking for nighttime entertainment at a variety of Prohibition Era speakeasies along Short Vincent. In the 1930s, Cleveland Public Safety Director Elliot Ness, who had earlier been an “untouchable” federal agent busting bootleggers in Chicago, padlocked a tavern on Short Vincent after he caught a waiter padding a bill.

In 1937, Morris “Mushy” Wexler opened the Theatrical on Short Vincent. Wexler ran a gambling wire service that provided odds for bookies and was later accused by a Senate committee of being a member of the Cleveland mob. Retired Cleveland newspaperman Julian Krawcheck, who came to Cleveland the same year the Theatrical opened, said, “Mushy was a racketeer in his early years, but he became a gentleman restaurateur and was really a delightful man.”

The Theatrical quickly attracted large crowds of sports and entertainment figures, lawyers, reporters and gamblers. According to The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History, Short Vincent offered “good food, underworld gossip, and the odds on almost anything.”

Wexler’s grandson, Jeffrey Spitz, sitting at the bar in the Theatrical, recalled, “This was probably the only place in the city of Cleveland where the judges and lawyers sat with felons. We had a mixed group of people that came in – every judge, every lawyer, and probably every hoodlum in the city of Cleveland hung out here. And when they were at the Theatrical, they were perfect gentlemen. We never had a problem. Everybody got along just wonderfully.”

Longtime Cleveland Press columnist Winsor French, who covered the local entertainment beat in a Rolls Royce, once wrote that Short Vincent was “the only part of Cleveland that literally never goes to bed.” He said, “It slows down, but it’s never quiet for very long.”

According to one Short Vincent legend, two regulars were disappointed when they saw a sign on their favorite
bar saying, “Closed for Alterations.” One looked at the other and said, “They must be washing the glasses.”

In the early 1940s, when a young singer named Dean Martin was performing with the Sammy Watkins Orchestra next door at the Vogue Room of the Hollenden Hotel, he would dash over to the Theatrical to join impromptu jam sessions with the jazz musicians.

Short Vincent was Cleveland’s entertainment center years before the Flats. Wexler booked a parade of jazz greats for his Theatrical Grill. In the early years, recalled Krawcheck, “It was almost entirely hot jazz musicians including Bobby Hackett and Jack Teagarden.” Teagarden played for two weeks in September of 1959, returned in July of 1960 for a six-day engagement and in August of 1962 for a two-week stay.

Jack Teagarden in Cleveland

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<tr>
<td>11/8/30-1/10/31</td>
<td>With Ben Pollack Orchestra at the Hollywood Restaurant</td>
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<td>2/8/35-2/14/35</td>
<td>With Paul Whiteman Orchestra at the Palace Theatre</td>
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<td>12/31/40</td>
<td>Teagarden Orch. at Trianon Ballroom</td>
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<td>5/5/58</td>
<td>Modern Jazz Room</td>
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<td>9/7/58-9/19/59</td>
<td>Panel discussion at Cleveland Public Library</td>
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<td>7/11/60-7/18/60</td>
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<td>8/20/62-9/1/62</td>
<td>Theatrical Grill</td>
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<td>8/29/62</td>
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Milton Berle, Frank Sinatra and Lorne Greene. “Whenever they were in town,” said Spitz, “they would come here.”

Morrie Fisher, the longtime head waiter at the Theatrical, recalled celebrities who visited the club: heavyweight champion Joe Louis, actresses Jayne Mansfield and Mamie Van Doren, actors Don Ameche and Yul Brynner, and sports figures Boog Powell, Blanton Collier and Billy Martin. Longtime Cleveland jazz enthusiast Ron Watt fondly recalled seeing New York Yankees’ manager Martin sitting on one side of the bar with Cleveland politicians and mobster Danny Greene (who was later killed in a mob bombing) on the other side of the bar.

In 1953, while Richard Tuma, a bartender at another Short Vincent spot, Mickey’s Show Bar, was sitting atop a flag pole for a month, a tornado ripped through the colorful little street. Tuma hurriedly shinnied down the pole and narrowly escaped injury as the tornado made a shambles of Vincent Avenue, but the Theatrical building managed to survive until seven years later.

Disaster struck the popular gathering place September 13, 1960. Fire broke out in the nightclub. Spitz recalled, “There were fire engines all over Vincent Avenue, Superior and East 9th Street. It was probably the worst fire of the year in Cleveland.” It took almost fire hours for the firemen to control the blaze. The building and the Theatrical Grill were destroyed.

“My grandfather was beside himself,” said Spitz. “His whole life was here. There wasn’t anything we could save except one bottle of Scotch that my dad (Wexler’s son-in-law, Buddy Spitz) has at home as a remembrance.”

Almost immediately after the fire, Wexler announced he would rebuild. While the construction was underway, Wexler rented a corner bar at the Hollenden and managed to keep most of his employees on the payroll and his regular customers supplied with beverages.

The handsome new $1.2 million restaurant opened about a year later with jazz trumpeter Jonah Jones performing on the bandstand.
After the fire, Wexler continued his policy of featuring top name jazz artists. The 1960s saw such jazz performers as Clark Terry, Jimmy Forrest, Red Norvo, Urbie Green and Dizzy Gillespie at the Theatrical. Muggsy Spanier, who had played frequently up the street at Kornman’s, played at the Theatrical in August of 1963. While he was there, he also played at half-time of a Cleveland Browns football game.

The "house band" at the Theatrical for several years in the 1960s: Bob McKee, Nancy Ray, Ken Seiffert and Hank Kohout

After Wexler died in March of 1979, Krawcheck said the music policy changed to include pop performers. By the 1970s, downtown Cleveland’s nightlife was gradually migrating to the Flats, a new entertainment area along the Cuyahoga River. By the 1980s, the Theatrical was the only nightclub remaining on Short Vincent and continued to offer jazz by such favorites as Bill Doggett, Harold Betters and Randy Moroz, who played piano for lunch and dinner. A favorite for many years was Glen Covington. Spitz said, “We brought him in once, then again and again. All of a sudden, we were bringing him in five and six times a year. They don’t have entertainers like that any more,” said Spitz.

In June of 1990, 53 years after the club opened, the Theatrical stopped presenting live jazz. For a couple of years in the 1990s, Jim Swingos rented the restaurant and made a brief attempt at restoring its former glory. But Swingos did not get enough business to pay the bills.

In 1999, the building was still there but there was no jazz, just a so-called “Gentlemen’s Club” featuring scantily-clad girls. Jeff and Buddy Spitz said their building, which housed Cleveland’s longest running and most legendary jazz nightclub, was up for sale.

Alpine Village

Another downtown restaurant that presented live jazz for years was Herman Pirchner’s Alpine Village at 1620 Euclid Avenue. While best known for its parties and gatherings of politicians and celebrities, the Alpine Village also offered live entertainment featuring such jazz artists as Cab Calloway, Pearl Bailey and Artie Shaw.

As colorful as some of these entertainers were, they often found themselves playing second fiddle to the unpredictable owner of the restaurant.

Pirchner was born in a small Austrian village and toured Europe as a circus clown and aerialist. When he was 19 (in 1925), he came to America during Prohibition. He could not comprehend why the United States outlawed “a wonderful beverage like beer.” So, with his brothers, Otto and Karl, he began brewing beer illegally in the basements of Cleveland social clubs and selling it to members. Soon, he opened his own beer hall, a Prohibition era speakeasy, at East 81st and Union.

In 1931, after working as a professional wrestler and a boxing promoter, Pirchner bought the Marigold Gardens restaurant at East 185th and Lakeshore Boulevard.

Three years later, he opened the Alpine Village, at what became Cleveland’s Playhouse Square. He served good food, had a dance floor that would rise and descend, and hosted a parade of celebrities. Bob Hope and Dwight Eisenhower were among the many who stopped in for dinner. The NBC Radio Network did regular coast-to-coast broadcasts from the Alpine Village and Pirchner’s German accent became known across the country.

One day at the restaurant, the manager of the Grotto Circus was complaining about the poor sale of advance tickets for his show. Pirchner suggested, “You should do something sensational, like have Karl Wallenda (the world-famous wire-walker), carry me on his back on the high wire.” The circus manager did just that and publicized the stunt heavily. Cleveland’s Public Hall was packed when the ringmaster announced what he called “a life or death performance.” Pirchner climbed onto the shoulders of the wire-walker and carefully balanced himself as he was carried, without any rehearsal or a safety net, on a tight wire suspended 50 feet above the floor. When the flamboyant restaurant owner came down a rope ladder to take his bows, he fell flat on his face and the crowd cheered.

In the early 1950s, when television was becoming popular and the theatres at Playhouse Square stopped offering live entertainment, downtown Cleveland was beginning to look like a ghost town at night. Pirchner started to lose money with his restaurant, but he kept it open until 1956.
Lindsay’s Sky Bar

Perhaps the most popular and certainly the longest running of the many jazz clubs in the University Circle area of Cleveland was Lindsay’s Sky Bar on Euclid Avenue near East 105th Street.

Willie Smith said, “Lindsay’s Sky Bar was one of the first clubs to book nationally-famous jazz artists on a regular basis in Cleveland. The Sky Bar was really the first real jazz club. It started bringing in the top stars – Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday and all the others.”

On the ceiling above the small stage there were lighted stars. There were also stars on the carpeting. The cover charge was $1.

The Sky Bar was owned by Phil Bash, his glamorous blonde wife Rickie, and other members of their family.

Operating from 1934 to 1952, Lindsay’s presented nationally-known jazz artists in a club setting for years before other jazz clubs began appearing after World War II. As early as 1937, an unknown singer named Frankie Laine sang at Lindsay’s. He told me Lindsay’s is where he first heard Cleveland pianist Art Cutlip play “Shine,” a song Laine later made into a national hit.

Phil and Rickie made frequent trips to New York City to scout and hire the best acts. Among the other jazz artists who performed at the Sky Bar were Coleman Hawkins, Earl “Fatha” Hines, Dizzy Gillespie, Roy Eldridge, Gene Krupa and Oscar Peterson. They were all treated as stars at Lindsay’s.


Fleets Inn

A popular bar in the late 1930s at East 9th and Lakeside, Fleets Inn, featured a jazz trio with pianist Ray Raysor, drummer Clarence Wetterman and a trumpet player. Veteran Cleveland guitarist Fred Sharp remembered the trio “always welcomed sit-ins.” Sharp said he jammed there when he was only 15 years old.

Cleveland Press writer Julian Krawcheck remembered one time in the 1940s when he tried to interest bandleader Red Nichols in a girl singer named June Hart who had been one of Frankie Laine’s early influences in Cleveland. Krawcheck said he took Nichols to Fleets Inn to hear her. But Nichols showed no interest whatsoever in the girl singer. “He wasn’t at all impressed by her,” said Krawcheck, “but he loved the drummer, Orly May.” According to Krawcheck, Nichols said to May, “I don’t know how much money you’re making, but if you pick up and go with me right now, I’ll double whatever it is.” May turned down the offer and stayed at Fleets Inn.
Gleason’s

Jimmy Saunders (center) playing at Gleason’s with Tiny Grimes (guitar), Red Prysock (sax) and Jerry “Bird Legs” DeWiliis (drums)

For two decades, from 1942 until 1962, one of the most popular jazz nightclubs in Cleveland was Gleason’s at East 55th and Woodland. Located in a predominantly black neighborhood of a heavily segregated city, the owner, William “Jap” Gleason, welcomed everybody who loved the music. It was one of several spots in Cleveland at the time where the races mixed freely – to hear jazz.

In the 1940s, Gleason’s presented mostly blues performers including Bo Diddley and B.B. King. James Brown, a young singer at the club, also swept floors and carried cases of beer to earn a little extra money.

Eventually, Gleason began booking nationally-known jazz performers including pianist Nat Cole and his King Cole Trio. Ella Fitzgerald sang at the club. So did Sammy Davis, Jr. Jack Teagarden played his trombone there, Dizzy Gillespie his trumpet, Charlie Parker his saxophone, and Ahmad Jamal the piano.

Veteran Cleveland pianist Jimmy Saunders said, “They would have different groups come in. One was Eddie Chamblee. Chief Story remembered Chamblee would walk on the bar while he was playing his saxophone. “And people would have to move their drinks back so he wouldn’t kick them over.”

At one time, Chamblee was married to singer Dinah Washington.

Story and many others also remembered Big Maybelle, a very popular singer at Gleason’s.

Another favorite at Gleason’s was guitarist Tiny Grimes who had toured with pianist Art Tatum and bassist Slam Stewart before coming to Cleveland. Willie Smith said Grimes played almost exclusively at Gleason’s all the time he was in Cleveland. Saunders, who played piano with Grimes’ group at Gleason’s, said, “Cleveland fell in love with Grimes. He had a great saxophonist who was a hell of an entertainer, Red Prysock, and they loved the drummer, (Jerry DeWillis) ‘Birdlegs’ they called him. Everybody loved ‘Birdlegs.’ And then, Ike Isaacs was a heck of a bass player. Ike went on to play for and marry Carmen McRae.”

Gleason also brought in such artists as Hazel Scott and Ahmad Jamal.

William Gleason closed his jazz nightclub in 1962 and went into the real estate business. After Gleason’s closed, The House of Blues operated at the same location from 1964 to 1967 and also presented a series of jazz artists.

Gleason died April 26th, 1996 at the age of 88.

Café Tia Juana

In the Glenville section of Cleveland, at East 105th and Massie Avenue, there was a large sign over the front door. It was shaped like a Mexican sombrero and it announced, “Café Tia Juana.” The club, operated by the Hoge Family, presented top name jazz artists from 1947 into the early 1970s.

included Carmen McRae, Sarah Vaughan and Billie Holiday.

Jimmy Saunders, who led the house band at the Tia Juana, remembered it “was beautifully designed on the inside. It was like a four-leaf clover and they had four bartenders, one in each part of the clover. And the stage revolved. I can remember playing with Miles Davis. He was standing up against the stage post playing, with his legs crossed, and going around and around in circles. It was a very beautiful place.”

Cleveland saxophonist Butch Linthicome remembered Charlie Parker playing on that revolving stage. “Man, it was awesome,” said Linthicome. “Bird would slowly turn and play the hell out of that horn while he seemed to admire what was happening as he watched himself in the mirrors that surrounded the interior of the club.”

Saunders had graduated from Cleveland’s Central High School in 1942, served in the Army, and graduated from Howard University. He returned to Cleveland in 1949 and began playing intermission piano at the Tia Juana. One night, guitarist Tiny Grimes approached Saunders and said he needed a piano player for his band. “I told Grimes,” said Saunders, “that I did not know how to play in a band. He said, ‘Well, you don’t have to solo in the beginning, just play some chords.’ I said, ‘I don’t know how to play band chords. All I know how to do is play for a vocalist.’ And he said, ‘Well, you’ll do.’”

Before long, Saunders was leading the house band at the Tia Juana, in the very demanding and challenging job of backing the major artists who came to Cleveland to play one-week engagements.

Saunders remembered the first time he rehearsed with Carmen McRae. “She said, ‘You’re not playing that the way I’d like for you to play it. Would you mind getting up?’ I didn’t know she could play the piano. And lo and behold, I suddenly realized she was an excellent pianist!”

The day that the Nat “King” Cole Trio was scheduled to open at the club, “his manager came in, went up on the bandstand, plunked a couple of notes on the piano and said, ‘Nat ‘King’ Cole can’t play on this piano!’ The owner immediately said to Saunders, ‘Jimmy, here’s $1,500. Go buy a piano!’ I took the $1,500 and bought a new piano.”

Saunders and Cole became good friends. Jimmy recalled, “He had Christmas dinner with me at our little house on Quincy Avenue and when my first son was born, he sent me a congratulatory telegram.”

When singer Dinah Washington was appearing at the Tia Juana, she said to the pianist, “Jimmy, I’d like to get a new pair of shoes. Do you know any place where I can buy a pair of shoes?” He took her to Milgrim’s Shoe Store downtown and was amazed. “She bought 30 pairs of shoes! Thirty pairs!! And Milgrim’s was a fairly expensive store.”

Saunders also played for Sarah Vaughan. He remembered her as “a classy lady, beautiful to work with and play for.”

After Billie Holiday finished singing one night, he took her and her manager to the Chinese restaurant at East 97th and Cedar to get something to eat. “It was the only place that was open that time of night.”

Other jazz artists who appeared at The Tia Juana included Pearl Bailey, Max Roach, Ray Brown, Ella Fitzgerald and Billy Eckstine.

Moe’s Main Street

Moe’s Main Street at East 79th and Euclid Avenue featured a number of jazz performers in the late 1940s and early ‘50s.

Mel Tormé, at the age of 25, sang at Moe’s in 1950. In his autobiography, It Wasn’t All Velvet, Tormé described Moe as “a thick little man whose entire wardrobe seemed to consist of a navy pea jacket and a woolen cap with a pom-pom.”

In July of 1951, Tony Bennett was singing at Moe’s when he met his first wife, Patricia Beech, who had just moved from Mansfield to Cleveland. In his autobiography, Bennett wrote, “I could see her from the stage. She was sitting ringside and I was taken with her beauty.”

Jazz photographer Gene Bixby remembered one night when dixieland cornetist Muggsy Spanier was playing at Moe’s. “Muggsy’s wife was in the front row,” said Bixby, “and Muggsy ripped off a chorus and his wife stood up and shouted, ‘It’s too good for the common people, Muggsy!’”

Moe’s Main Street was also the spot where the Four Freshmen first performed in Cleveland in 1951. They
appeared with an unknown singer named Johnny Ray, who later became a major national recording star. Freshman Ross Barbour said, “Moe’s Main Street was a place where all the entertainers worked. In those days,” said Barbour, “Ray would play a song and bang on the piano. Then, “He’d rip off the front of the piano and throw the keyboard over.” Smiling, Barbour called it “an exciting demonstration of passion about the music.”

On New Year’s Eve of 1951, then-unknown entertainers Johnny Ray and the Four Freshmen teamed up to sing “Auld Lang Syne” together at Moe’s Main Street.

**Loop Lounge**

One of the most popular downtown jazz clubs of the late 1940s and 1950s was the Loop Lounge at 612 Prospect Avenue (near the later site of Gund Arena and Jacobs Field). It was opened by Teddy Blackmon in 1948 and remained in operation until 1958.

Chief Story said, “The Loop was the place to be, especially on Sunday.” He remembered seeing Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, Clifford Brown, Tiny Bradshaw and Lionel Hampton at the Prospect Avenue club. Other jazz artists who appeared at the Loop included Gene Ammons, Lester Young, Chet Baker, Johnny Hodges, Billie Holiday, Milt Buckner, Terry Gibbs, Illinois Jacquet, James Moody, Sonny Stitt, Charlie Parker, Ben Webster, and J.J. Johnson and Kai Winding.

Bixby, who photographed many of the jazz greats in Cleveland clubs in the ‘40s and ‘50s, said the Loop was his favorite jazz spot. “It was folksy,” he said. “Everybody sort of knew everybody else.” Bixby said he never went on opening night for a new jazz act because “it was always too crowded and you couldn’t get a seat.”

Bixby remembered a packed house one night when J.J. Johnson and Kai Winding, riding the popularity crest of their “J.J. & Kai” hit records, were playing at the Loop. Bixby roamed behind the bandstand with his camera to get photographs of the trombonists and their group.

Bixby was also there one night when singer Billie Holiday and saxophonist Ben Webster were performing. “When it was time to play the next set,” recalled Bixby, “Ben had a little trouble getting back up on the bandstand. He sort of stumbled. Billie looked at him and said, ‘Ben, you can’t play. You’re drunk!’ That didn’t bother Ben at all. He got up and played the whole set beautifully.”

Jimmy Saunders, who had led the house band at the Tia Juana and later held the same job at the Loop Lounge, recalled playing for King Pleasure, the singer who made a career out of vocalizing words to James Moody’s classic “Moody’s Mood For Love.” Saunders said, “He had a big throne that he sat on and wore a robe. That was his trademark. He was very popular at the Loop Lounge.”

When Saunders was playing with Coleman Hawkins at the Loop, Hawkins said, “Let’s play ‘Lover.’” Saunders asked, “What key?” Hawkins said, “F sharp.” Saunders told Hawkins, “I can’t play that in F sharp.” They played “Lover” in E flat that night, but Saunders spent the entire next day practicing the song in every key on the keyboard.” That night, when Hawkins again called for ‘Lover,’ he asked Saunders what key he wanted to play in. “This time,” Saunders said, “we’ll start in C and we’ll go up in fourths when I holler ‘change key,’ and we’ll just change fourths until I tell you to stop!” Coleman laughed. We had a lot of fun. He was a wonderful gentleman.”

The following week, Charlie Parker came to the Loop and Saunders was nervous about playing with the saxophone giant. “I went down to the Record Rendez-vous and spent all week listening to all the records I could of Charlie Parker.”

After playing two nights, Saunders said he was feeling very comfortable playing with Bird. On the third night, the house was packed and “there were better musicians than I in the audience when, all of a sudden, Parker starts playing a ballad. I didn’t recognize the song. Bassist Rodney Richardson had played with the Count Basie band for four years and with Eddie Heywood for three years and I usually could depend
Cleveland Jazz History

Rodney Richardson at age 83 in 2001

Courtesy of Martin Martinez

upon him to recognize a song and call out the chords. Fats Heard was brushing on the drums. I said, ‘Rodney, what is he playing?’ Rodney said, ‘I don’t know.’ I was sitting there with my hands folded while Parker was playing. Finally, Rodney said, ‘This is “Stella By Starlight,”’ and he said, ‘Jimmy, it’s in F sharp.’ I didn’t know it even if it was in C. All I could do was sit there.

“When Parker finished playing his solo, he turned and looked at me, and just stood there for 32 bars. He stood there in silence. I sat in silence. Nobody was doing anything but the bass and the drums. After the 32 bars, Parker turned around and began playing again.

Cleveland pianist Bobby Few, who later played with the Steve Lacy group in Paris, was there that night and remembered the incident. “I was 16 or 17,” said Few. “I walked in the door and Parker was playing with pianist Jimmy Saunders. Some problem arose. Jimmy quit playing and Charlie just kept playing.”

Saunders later said, “Parker never said anything to me about it. I never said anything to him about it. But, for months, the other musicians used to say, ‘Stella By Starlight’ and I thought I was going to lose my mind. To this day, I still don’t know how to play ‘Stella By Starlight.’”

Drummer Lawrence “Jacktown” Jackson also played with Parker at the Loop Lounge. “Jacktown” said, “It was wonderful! I really felt that my drums were playing me! It was just that easy.” For Jacktown, playing with Parker was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. “When I first started playing music, I said to myself, ‘If I can play well enough to play with Charlie Parker, this is my ultimate goal.’ And this is what happened!”

When Parker was off the bandstand in Cleveland, Jackson said, “He was a devil! Whew! Yeah!” Jackson refused to disclose some of the things Parker did in Cleveland, but other people said the drummer and Parker once spent a night together in the Cleveland city jail following a police narcotics raid at the old Majestic Hotel.

Chief Story remembered one night when Parker arrived an hour and a half late for his gig at the Loop. “Before he got halfway to the bar,” said Story, “someone stopped him and started talking. He stood there and talked for another hour. Melvin, the boss of The Loop Lounge, said, ‘He’ll never play here again!’ He never did. Melvin never hired him again.”

Photographer Bixby, raised on swing and traditional jazz, had trouble appreciating bebop at first. He remembered a night when bop pianist Billy Taylor was playing at the Loop. “He was playing modern piano and it puzzled me,” said Bixby.

When the Woody Herman big band played at the Loop, they had to build a special stage to accommodate all 16 players and their instruments.

After the Loop closed in 1958, the Domino Lounge operated in the same location for a few years.

Saunders, by leading the house bands at both the Tia Juana and the Loop Lounge, probably played with more national jazz artists than any other Cleveland musician.

He also made one record, “Jimmy’s Blues,” a self-produced and self-distributed 78, which sold 250,000 copies. He remembered, “The sales got to be so big that a disc jockey in Akron quit his job to help promote the record. My wife quit her job to help distribute it, and we invested in a quarter-page ad in Variety. The orders started coming in from all over the country—from Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, New York, all over.” Because of the popularity of his record, Saunders traveled around the country with his band. One time, while driving from Cincinnati to Cleveland, he was listening to his car radio. “I tuned to three stations and all three, one after the other, played ‘Jimmy’s Blues.’ That was one of my greatest thrills.”

Ironically, Saunders never saved a copy of his hit record. “I was the owner and the bandleader,” he said. “I had a basement full of them, but now, I don’t have a single copy.” We managed to find a copy for him.

Leo’s Casino

Leo’s Casino was originally a bar opened in 1952 by Leo Frank at East 48th and Central. Frank expanded his bar into a jazz room and booked such jazz greats as Dizzy Gillespie, Cannonball Adderley, Lou Rawls, Gene Ammons, Sonny Stitt and John Coltrane. But, one night in 1962 when pianist Ramsey Lewis and his trio were playing, the club was destroyed by fire.

After the fire, Leo’s moved to Carnegie Avenue. In September of 1963, after Frank was joined by partner Jules Berger, they opened a new, bigger nightclub in the Quad Hall Hotel building at 7500 Euclid Avenue. The new Leo’s Casino seated about 700 people and served dinner.

Leo’s continued to present top jazz artists but also booked rhythm-and-blues acts and comedians. Dick Gregory called Leo’s “the most integrated nightclub in America.” Longtime Leo’s Casino emcee Freddie Arrington later remembered, “The audience always
The original Leo's at East 48th and Central

looked like a great big checkerboard to me.”

There were usually three shows a night Thursday through Sunday and the admission charge was usually $2. At times, for more expensive acts, it jumped to $4.50.

Trumpeter Freddie Hubbard said he would never forget performing at Leo’s Casino. “Most of the time, (when he was playing with Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers) we played big concerts, but this was right in the neighborhood. It was one of the best experiences I’ve had because the people who came to this club really liked the music and they wanted to hear some jazz. These people were really into the music.”

Hubbard, who spent a full week at Leo’s, also remembered, “They had balloons in the ceiling.” He also recalled Curtis Fuller, another member of the Jazz Messengers at the time, “had a bar bill of $116 one night. He must have bought a lot of people drinks. He couldn’t have consumed that much in a week.”

Hubbard also provided a touring musician’s view of playing in Cleveland jazz clubs. He said Cleveland jazz audiences were generally more conservative than jazz audiences on the East and West Coasts. “The people in Cleveland,” said Hubbard, “want to hear the real thing. They want to hear the hard, straight-ahead bebopping and the jazz like Coltrane, Bird, Miles and myself play. They’re true listeners, not people who go with whatever is hot and commercial.”

Hubbard also said, “When you come to a place like Cleveland, the people want to accept you into their homes and get to know you as a person. In most places, they just want to do business with you and you’re gone. That’s one of the traits I like about Cleveland. The people are nice people and they want to treat you to a nice meal and treat you like real people.”

By the late 1960s, the costs of booking top name entertainers began skyrocketing. Frank told the Cleveland Plain Dealer, “We’d pay an act $3,000 or $4,000 (for four nights) and suddenly they could get $15,000 for one night.” Frank sold his share of the club to Berger in 1970 and the club closed in 1972.

In June of 1999, Frank was honored when the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame designated the Euclid Avenue site of his former club an historic landmark. Two weeks after the ceremony, Frank died of respiratory failure at the age of 71.

Modern Jazz Room

Drummer Fats Heard, who had toured and recorded with pianist Erroll Garner, returned to Cleveland and operated the Modern Jazz Room downtown near the old Central Market on East 4th Street.

In 1954, it was called the Cotton Club. In 1957, Heard bought the club, renamed it “the Modern Jazz Room” and presented top-flight jazz artists until 1960. Usually playing for a week at a time were such artists as Erroll Garner, J.J. Johnson, Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, The Modern Jazz Quartet, George Shearing and Horace Silver.

Photographer Bixby remembered Carmen McRae singing at the Modern Jazz Room. “Those places were usually kind of noisy,” said Bixby, “but when she sang, you could hear a pin drop. She could mesmerize an audience.”

Bixby also recalled Cleveland guitarist Bill de Arango at the Modern Jazz Room. It was after de Arango had become a sensation on New York’s 52nd Street, playing with Dizzy Gillespie and others. Despite de Arango’s amazing guitar solos, Bixby said he was not impressed at first. “Bill was a puzzle,” said Bixby. “He only played when he took a solo. He never played rhythm.” But Bixby’s attitude about de Arango dissipated later when he got to know the celebrated guitarist. “He was a very shy man and I think he didn’t want to interfere with the other guys’ solos. So he didn’t play rhythm. I misinterpreted it.”

On Sunday night, June 24, 1956, The Modern Jazz Room featured an all-star bebop line-up of Clifford Brown on trumpet, Sonny Rollins on tenor sax, Max Roach on drums, Richie Powell on piano and George Morrow on bass. The following night, after playing an informal gig in Philadelphia, Brown and Powell were driving to Chicago and were killed in a traffic accident on the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

Singer Marilyn Holderfield remembered going to the Modern Jazz Room in 1957 to hear her idol, Billie Holiday. Holderfield told Cleveland Plain Dealer writer
Michael Drexler, “I couldn’t believe it. I was trembling. She looked beautiful.” When Marilyn told Billie that her parents didn’t want her to sing jazz, she said, “Billie Holiday just took hold of my hand and encouraged me. She was so sweet. She said, ‘Just do it your way!’ And this was the last year of her life. I will never forget that.”

Trombonist and singer Jack Teagarden performed at the Modern Jazz Room for a week in May of 1958. In 1961, the club became The Club Downbeat and featured local jazz artists.

University Circle

Cleveland trumpeter Kenny Davis remembered the area around Cleveland’s University Circle being a mecca for jazz fans in the early 1960s. He said it seemed like there were jazz clubs almost everywhere.

Davis said, “You could park your car on 105th and walk to ten or twelve different clubs featuring live music by Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Billie Holiday and dozens of others.

One night in 1962, Davis and his wife made the rounds. They caught Oscar Peterson and Ray Brown at Leo’s Casino; an all-blind group that included Roland Kirk and Eddie Baccus in the front window at the Club 100; and Donald Byrd, Pepper Adams, Sam Jones, Louis Hayes and Herbie Hancock downstairs at The Alhambra.

Chief Story remembered that jazz fans didn’t really need a car to hear good jazz. “A lot of people walked from one club to another. You could leave one corner, where they had a little four or five-piece band in the window, and walk a block or so and there would be another one.”

Town Casino

Just down the street from Lindsay’s Sky Bar, on Euclid between East 105th and 107th was the Town Casino with two jazz rooms. There was a bar in the front and a ballroom in the rear. Chief Story remembered seeing saxophonist Eddie Chamblee “walking the bar” (getting up on the bar to play) in the front and Lionel Hampton’s big band playing in the ballroom. Story also recalled Billy Eckstine and Sarah Vaughan performing at the Town Casino.

Others who performed at the Towne Casino included Count Basie, Coleman Hawkins, J.J. Johnson, Sarah Vaughan, George Shearing and Louis Armstrong.

Club 100

The seemingly endless line of bars with live jazz along Euclid Avenue near University Circle were all competing with each other for customers. Hoping to attract jazz fans, some had their musicians playing in the front window where passers by could see and hear them.

At the Club 100 at East 100th and Euclid one night in the early 1960s, there were three musicians playing in the window and there was a sign announcing the jazz group. It said, “The Three Blind Mice.”

If you walked in and listened for a while, you discovered the three musicians were all sightless. On the keyboards was Eddie Baccus who had graduated a year or so earlier from the Ohio State School for the Blind in Columbus and had moved to Cleveland. Playing drums was George Cook. And playing the saxophone was a 25-year-old from Columbus named Roland Kirk.

After a few tunes, Kirk surprised almost everybody in the Euclid Avenue bar by playing three instruments simultaneously – in three-part harmony!

Most of the customers were amazed and amused. Kirk had worked hard to develop the trick fingering and what he called “circular breathing” (inhaling through his nose and exhaling through his mouth at the same time).

Later, after touring with Charlie Mingus and changing his name to Rahsaan Roland Kirk, he became a well-known as a serious jazz musician.

When Kirk suffered a stroke in 1975 at the age of 39, one side of his body was partially paralyzed. But he devised a method of playing two horns at one time, using one arm. Kirk died in 1977. Baccus continued playing for years in Cleveland.

Others who performed at Club 100 between 1959 and 1966 included Clevelanders Gay Crosse, Joe Alexander and Weasel Parker. The club was destroyed by fire in 1966.

Jazz Temple

About a half-mile east at 11339 Mayfield, near the intersection of Euclid Avenue was the Jazz Temple which was opened in 1962 by Winston Willis. The club,
The Jazz Temple on Mayfield near Euclid

housed in a two-story brick building, also featured many national jazz artists, including Art Blakey, Les McCann, Sonny Rollins, Herbie Hancock, Miles Davis, Stan Getz, Dinah Washington and John Coltrane. Washington sang there the week of July 23, 1963. Coltrane and his group played twice at the Jazz Temple — in February and September of 1963. During the September engagement, drummer Elvin Jones arrived a day late and Cleveland drummer Lawrence “Jacktown” Jackson filled in for him, playing with Coltrane, McCoy Tyner and Jimmy Garrison.

But there were problems at the Jazz Temple. Some people apparently were not happy with the jazz club in the neighborhood.

Trumpeter Freddie Hubbard, playing with Blakey’s Jazz Messengers at the time, remembered a bomb threat at the Jazz Temple. Hubbard told me, “I don’t think the people in the neighborhood wanted the club to be there so they threatened to throw a bomb in the club that night.” But, according to Hubbard, “Blakey told his band members, ‘I don’t care what they do, we’re going to play anyway.’

“We were playing ‘Three Blind Mice,’” said Hubbard, “while a friend of Art’s came in and danced on nails and walked through broken glass.” The dedicated young jazz musicians did not understand why they were doing what amounted to a vaudeville show at the jazz club. Another member of the band, Cedar Walton, said, “Why are we playing with this guy? We’re supposed to be playing jazz!”

Blakey explained, “This will take the people’s mind off the bomb threat.” Hubbard admitted it did just that. Despite the threat, there was no bomb.

But later, there was an explosion at the Jazz Temple (August 13, 1963) and a shooting incident. During an argument one night, singer Gloria Lynne was accidentally shot in the leg. The Jazz Temple soon closed.

Some believe the bombing and the shooting at the Jazz Temple contributed to the end of the jazz boom in University Circle and Cleveland.

Over the years, there were many nightclubs around the University Circle area. Byron Smith remembered, “You had the Sky Bar, the Mirror Show Bar, the Band Box on the corner, Jack’s Place upstairs on 105th, The Club 100 and the Town Casino.” Others were the Cabin Club on Euclid between East 105th and 107th and the Alhambra Grill at East 105th and Euclid. It was owned and run by colorful longtime Cleveland underworld figure Shondor Birns. Also in the neighborhood was the Merry Widow club.

Jazzman and Superman

A University Circle area jazz club played an unusual role in a significant development in pop culture history.

In 1940, 32-year-old Leo Nowak was a part time jazz musician playing at a club at East 105th and Euclid. During the day, he worked as a graphic artist. To supplement his income, Nowak painted a mural at the club where he was playing. One night, during a break, a man approached Nowak, told him how much he liked the mural, and said he knew two guys who were looking for an artist. The two had just opened a small studio at 105th and Euclid.

“I just walked right up to the studio and introduced myself,” remembered Nowak. After looking at a sample of his work, the two guys hired him on the spot.

The “two guys” were Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel. They had been childhood friends in Glenville and after graduating from Glenville High School, dreamed up the idea of a comic strip hero who possessed superhuman strength. It took them four years to sell their idea to a comic book publishing company.

By the time jazz musician and graphic artist Leo Nowak walked into their studio, Shuster and Siegel had a big national comic book hit — Superman.
Shortly after they hired him, Nowak was drawing covers and stories for *Superman* comic books. Nowak said Siegel wrote the stories and Shuster “really was not a very good artist.” Nowak did much of the drawing.

Nowak drew *Superman* in 1940 and ‘41 until he was drafted into the Army. After he left, Shuster, Siegel and other artists continued producing the comic book art from their studio at 105th and Euclid. Those *Superman* comic books led to newspaper comic strips, a daily radio program and, in later years, a television series and motion pictures.

After World War II, Shuster and Siegel moved to New York City. But in 1948, after they demanded more money from DC Comics, they were fired and *Superman* was written and drawn by others.

Shuster died in 1992, Siegel in 1996.

Onetime Cleveland jazz musician Nowak, who became successful illustrator in California, died January 6, 2001 at the age of 93.

**Euclid Shore Club**

A newspaper ad for Geer’s Euclid Shore Club

“It was kind of a fluke the way it all happened,” said Hank Geer as he recalled his unusual jazz club at 17555 Lakeshore Boulevard.

After playing with the big bands of Charlie Spivak, Ray Anthony, Ralph Marterie and Tommy Dorsey, Geer returned to Cleveland in 1949 and went into the construction and development business while continuing to play his saxophone. He opened a small motel with just four units in 1951 not far from Euclid Beach Park. Geer’s sister, Bertha Basler, later recalled, “My father built the motel for Henry because he didn’t want him playing music out where they were selling liquor.”

By 1952, the motel had grown to 36 units. Then Hank decided to build a house for himself nearby. “One thing I always wanted in my own home,” said Geer, “was a front room large enough to rehearse an 18-piece band. So I built it.”

But Geer soon discovered that his new house was not really a private home in the normal sense of the word. His sister said his many friends from his years on the road with the big bands started showing up.

“Lee Mervin came into town,” remembered Hank, “and said, ‘I just got in from Canada and I’m broke. Got a place for me to stay?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, I got a room, come on down.’” Before long, comedian Marvin moved from the motel into Geer’s house. And others began arriving.

“One guy said his wife threw him out of the house. He wanted a place to stay. I said, ‘What the hell, we’ll get another roll-away bed.’ And then I had dancers staying there, and other musicians, and pretty soon there were about ten people, all living there, dancers practicing and musicians playing.”

Eventually, with so many artists and entertainers living and playing in his house, Geer decided to turn his home into a club. He got a liquor license. The Euclid Shore Club began as a private club in 1955 and membership quickly grew to about 1,500.

Bertha Basler said, “Because they had liquor there, my mother didn’t go down to that club for two years.” But, it became very popular. “Nobody could find any place like this,” said Geer, with all those musicians coming and going and playing music. We started making shows.”

Almost every night for years, musicians and fans flocked to Geer’s Euclid Shore Club. Among the regulars were pianists Hugh Thompson and Bill Gidney and bassist Chink Stevenson.

Hank and his sister soon discovered it wasn’t easy running a nightclub and restaurant. “It was a 24-hour business,” said Bertha. “Henry had to do the cooking if the cook didn’t show up. One night, after he cooked dinners, he was playing the organ and the electricity went off. We had to light candles. A short time later, we got a phone call that the motel was robbed—all in one night.”

In the 1960s, the club also featured dixieland jazz. Clarinetist Ted Witt remembered playing at Geer’s club with a two-beat group called the Forest City Jazz Band. Basler remembered Witt and others, who had been playing for fun in each other’s houses on Friday nights, “came marching in one night. They didn’t know how to go about getting a paid gig and somebody told them, ‘Go to Hank Geer’s. Just go in and tell him you want to play.’ Henry was playing the organ when they marched in playing. He just laughed about it and, sure enough, he let them play. “We got hired,” said Witt, “and we were there for about two years on Saturday nights.” Basler said, “They were just great.”

Local jazz legend Tony Lovano, known by most of his friends as “Big T,” spent a lot of time playing at the unusual Lakeshore Boulevard club. In the mid-1960s, Lovano brought his teenaged son with him to sit in.
Drummer Gene Krupa with Hank Geer at his Euclid Shore Club in February of 1967

Joey Lovano, who later became Downbeat magazine’s three-time Jazz Artist of the Year, recalled, “My dad first started taking me to some of his gigs and sessions at the age of 13. I would listen and maybe sit in on a tune or two at the end of the night. At Hank Geer’s Euclid Shore Club, I first met Bill Gidney, Paul Bunion, Hank Geer, Bill de Arango, Ace Carter, Tony Haynes, Emil Boyd, Chink Stevenson and Eddie Baccus.” Lovano said, “I was all ears. These musicians all became my teachers in one way or another.”

At times, some nationally known musicians stopped in to play and listen. They included drummer Gene Krupa and singer-pianist Johnny Ray.

Finally in 1972, when Hank and Bertha’s mother became ill, Hank decided to sell the club and the motel. Bertha said, “He thought we should quit and just thought we better sell the whole thing and be done with it.”

A man named Richard Cerri bought both the motel and the club and changed the name to Cerri’s Supper Club. He hired Geer to play there for about a year, but according to Bertha, “He just let it go down hill and didn’t keep it up the way we always did.”

From 1955 to 1972, Hank Geer’s Euclid Shore Club was a major spot for jazz in Cleveland.

After-hours jam session spots

Many of Cleveland’s older musicians still believe some of the best jazz was played in the early morning hours at illegal after-hours spots in Cleveland.

The most legendary was Val’s in the Alley near East 86th and Cedar where pianist Art Tatum held court for years. But there were many others.

One of the most popular after-hours spots for a number of years was Jimmy Owens’ on Thackery Avenue just off East 55th. Longtime Cleveland guitarist Fred Sharp remembered it was a three-story house run by Owens who was known as the “Black Mayor of Cleveland.” Sharp said Owens did not hire entertainers, but many musicians would stop in to join all-night jam sessions. “I remember playing there myself,” said Sharp, “and hearing Art Tatum, Ray Raynor and Caesar and Tadd Dameron.”

Retired newspaper editor Julian Krawcheck recalled the music at Jimmy Owens’ would continue until five or six o’clock in the morning, long after the legal nightclubs had to close for the night. “You had to knock on the door to get in and say, ‘Steve sent me’ or something,” said Krawcheck. Both black and white musicians would join the jam sessions after their regular gigs. Saxophonist Caesar Dameron was one of Krawcheck’s favorites. “Never mind his numbers business,” said the former editor, “He was a damned good alto man. He was real good. I always thought he was a much better musician than Tadd.”

Earl Douthitt remembered, “All the big time entertainers came by.” But, when various other after-hours diversions invaded the neighborhood, Jimmy Owens’ and some of the other after-hours spots began to disappear. Douthitt said Cleveland Police Chief Michael Blackwell played a role in their demise. According to Douthitt, “The mayor of Cleveland told Blackwell and his detectives to start kicking down the doors because they had a red-light district down there on Thackery and Hawthorne with prostitutes and pimps.” It ended the after-hours jazz in the neighborhood.

Another after-hours joint was called the SDCH&Y Club. It was at East 40th and Woodland. Willie Smith remembered, “It didn’t open until 12 o’clock at night.” Smith said he remembered Duke Ellington and the members of his band came to the SDCH&Y Club whenever they were in town. “We knew that when Duke came to town, this is where all the musicians would be after midnight.”

After-hour rib joints

In the view of many Cleveland jazz musicians, various rib joints around town were almost as important to local jazz as the nightclubs and after-hours spots, particularly in the 1930s and ‘40s. The rib spots did not provide music but they did provide tasty nourishment for the musicians after they completed their gigs.

Fred Sharp remembered, “The rib joints that many jazz musicians used to frequent after work, from 2 to 5 a.m., were part of the jazz scene in Cleveland.”

He remembered such Cedar Avenue rib places as Hot
Sauce Williams, 'Bama’s, Fraziers, Bob’s Barbecue and Cedar Gardens. Other rib joints on Carnegie Avenue were Whitmore’s and the Pepper Pot.

Unlike other rib joints, Sharp said the Pepper Pot at East 77th and Carnegie frequently featured local unpaid talent in jam sessions almost every night.

“I remember having barbecued ribs many times,” said Sharp, “with Frankie Laine; Art and Dick Cutlip; pianists Ace Carter, Poison Gardner and Lanny Scott; guitarist Willie Lewis and many others.” Scott, a nationally known piano player had performed with such artists as Jonah Jones and Coleman Hawkins.

**Smiling Dog Saloon**

The 1970s was a lean period for jazz in Cleveland. There were few clubs offering live jazz. The most prominent was the Smiling Dog Saloon on the West Side at West 25th and Woodbridge, just off Interstate 71.

The Smiling Dog, a former bowling alley, was opened as a jazz club in 1971 by Roger Bohn and continued almost exclusively as Cleveland’s site for jazz until 1975. Saxophonist Ernie Krivda played in the house band at the Smiling Dog and performed with a variety of touring national artists including Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock and Weather Report. In October of 1973, the Smiling Dog attractions included the Gil Evans Big Band and pianist Bill Evans.

Joe Lovano played frequently at the Smiling Dog when he was a teenager. Lovano said, “I remember hearing a lot of great bands there – Stan Getz, Sonny Stitt with Milt Jackson, Miles Davis, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, the Keith Jarrett Trio and Quartet.” Many played two-week engagements. Lovano said Krivda, Bill de Arango and Skip Hadden played as a trio at the club “and I used to sit in with them.”

Lovano told me he got his first big break while playing at the West Side jazz club. “Willie Smith and I sat in with Brother Jack McDuff there in 1975,” said Lovano. “I was playing baritone saxophone in an ensemble with four saxophones. Willie was playing lead alto. About two weeks after we played a couple of nights with Jack at the Smiling Dog, McDuff called and asked us to join his band and go on tour. That was right when I was first starting to play and record with Lonnie Smith.”

Other Clevelanders who performed frequently at the Smiling Dog included vibraphonist Ron Busch, trumpeter Kenny Davis, saxophonist Ron Kozak, pianist Bill Dobbins, and drummer Jamey Haddad.

When the Smiling Dog closed in 1975, the Cleveland jazz nightclub scene was quiet for almost a decade.

After closing his jazz club, Bohn opened an antique shop on Clifton Boulevard. On Tuesday, May 21, 1996, Bohn was found badly beaten in his small shop. He died the next day at the age of 51. Bohn’s wife said she had tried to call Roger at the shop, but no one answered the phone. She rushed to the store and found her husband on the floor, badly beaten. She ran next door to a French restaurant and asked the owner, Jim Adams, if she could use his phone to call 911.

Cleveland homicide detectives had very little to go on, but they did find a Lakewood woman and her daughter who had been in Bohn’s shop shortly before the beating. They said there was also a man there who appeared to be very nervous. He was still there when the woman and her daughter left.

Seven months later, the police charged a 34 year old thief and confidence man. The woman and her daughter identified him as the man they had seen in Bohn’s store. But a jury acquitted him and the murder of the one-time Cleveland jazz club owner remained unsolved.

**Bop Stop**

In June of 1991, when jazz was making a comeback in Cleveland, bassist Gary Aprile walked into a new and different jazz club and said, “Ron Busch is fulfilling a life-long dream. Busch, a jazz vibraphonist, opened his own club, the Bop Stop at East 40th and St. Clair.

“This club has all the intangibles,” said Aprile. “It’s owned by a musician, it has the right music, the right atmosphere, and the music is the focus.”

Busch, a Cleveland native, began talking about his dream in the 1980s after studying with Cal Tjader and playing on the West Coast with such artists as saxophonist John Handy and pianist Denny Zeitlin. The West High School graduate said that someday he wanted to be able to present Cleveland area jazz artists and his...
own music in his own place, in a setting designed for those who really want to listen to jazz. By 1990 he said, “If I could find a place I could afford, I would give it a shot.”

Busch said, “I felt that by no stretch was I breaking new ground. There had been other clubs — the Village Vanguard in New York, Shelly's Mann Hole, and the Black Hawk in Chicago — that made music the focus.”

With his partner, Robert Marks, the former manager of the Smiling Dog Saloon, Busch leased a little neighborhood corner bar at East 40th and St. Clair. They painted and decorated the room, set up a small bandstand near the front window, and began presenting many of the best jazz performers in Cleveland. The Bop Stop quickly became very popular with jazz musicians and fans alike.

In the first few years, Busch seldom booked more than four or five musicians, but they usually brought some of their friends to sit in. One night he booked pianist Chip Stephens and his trio. “They had played a concert with the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra,” said Busch, “and ran over here after the concert, got set up, and began playing by 10:30. Then some of the other players from the band, (trombonist) Pat Hallaran, (saxophonist) Chris Karlic and others came in and they all played great. The people here were just in awe at such great music in a little room like this!”

Jazz textbook author Mark Gridley of Shaker Heights said “Busch’s Bop Stop had become the mecca for serious jazz fans and musicians who need an inexpensive place that is convenient and unpretentious. It is where they can comfortably listen to live jazz without being distracted by the extraneous activities common to most other night spots.” Added Gridley, “Busch runs the Bop Stop with the heart of a musician and the dedication of a jazz fan.”

Busch booked his own favorite musicians, all top-flight professionals, many of whom had recorded and toured with national names. His policy bothered some other Cleveland jazz musicians.

“It’s not an oasis for all the musicians in town,” replied Busch, “but it is an oasis for the musicians who have decided that they’re going to challenge themselves. There’re a lot of guys who are not willing to take the chance.”

The Bop Stop also quickly became the spot for name touring musicians to sit in after their formal performances. Among them were Tommy Flanagan, Bobby Watson, members of Manhattan Transfer and Ken Peplowski. It also became almost an annual event for called the Jazz Unit that played almost every Monday night at the Bop Stop.

In 1994, bassist Dave Morgan moved back to Cleveland and stopped in at the Bop Stop on a Monday night. “I was shocked,” said Morgan, “hearing players of the caliber of Schantz, Busch, and (saxophonists) Howie Smith and John Klayman. I thought it was incredible. I ran home that night and knew I would have to write for this band.” Morgan became a regular bassist, composer and arranger for the Bop Stop Jazz Unit.

Five years after opening his club at East 40th and St. Clair, Busch moved in 1996 to bigger quarters downtown at West 6th and Lakeside in the historic warehouse district not far from the Flats. He also changed the name of his jazz club slightly to “The Cleveland Bop Stop.”

After moving downtown, Busch’s view of his jazz club changed somewhat. He told Clint O’Connor of the Cleveland Plain Dealer, “We tried to go back in time to create the authenticity of the old clubs. But then, we found out stuff had changed. In the ’60s people drank, smoked and stayed out late. But, in the ’90s, many people are teetotalers. They want a smoke-free environment and they want to be home by midnight.”

Even with an updated approach, Busch was having trouble making ends meet. Anita Nonneman went to his rescue and became Busch’s partner. “She said, ‘I believe in what you’re doing and I believe in the guys that are doing it with you.’” Busch called Nonneman “his patron saint, a maternal figure for the Bop Stop. If the Bop Stop is my child,” he said, “Anita is its stepmother.”

In the fall of 2000, Busch and Nonneman closed the club on West 6th Street and planned to move to a third Bop Stop location at 2920 Detroit Avenue by the spring of 2001.

They wanted to restore an old warehouse building, but, in Busch’s words, “We found the ground that building sat on was completely compromised with rubble underneath.” An old farmhouse from the early 20th century had been collapsed beneath the warehouse.
building. So, instead of restoring the building, they decided to tear it down and construct a brand new jazz nightclub from the ground up — the first ever in Cleveland!

The project stretched on for more than two years, but the wait for jazz fans was worth it. About 150 crowded the new Cleveland Bop Stop Friday night, March 7, 2003 and were treated to a state-of-the-art jazz listening room. The central point was the stage. It was ringed by three tiers of tables and chairs configured in a semi-circle with the bar at the rear, a fireplace and large windows looking out to a patio and Lake Erie in the distance. There was not a bad seat in the house.

Busch and Nonneman hired an acoustical engineer to design the stage and a sound system which included a control room. Busch said, “It’s a nice clear sound with equipment we control from the sound booth.” Musicians on opening night said it would be an excellent place to record.

They also installed an elaborate computer-run lighting system, also controlled from the booth.

When the new Cleveland Bop Stop opened, Busch said he planned to expand his stylistic approach to presenting jazz. Unlike the earlier Bop Stops, he planned to present some singers, Latin jazz, blues, fusion, and even dixieland and occasional national jazz artists.

After the long construction delays, Busch and Nonneman were obviously proud of their new club. Busch smiled and said, “All we have to do now is handle the baby with care and bring in the best music we can.”

### Night Town

An upscale restaurant at the top of Cedar Hill in Cleveland Heights, Night Town, opened in 1965 and owner John Barr began presenting local jazz pianists and occasional touring traditional artists.

In 1999, Barr and Manager Brendan Ring, who later purchased the restaurant, hired Jim Wadsworth to book top national jazz artists. Wadsworth began bringing in such musicians as Ahmad Jamal, McCoy Tyner, Ray Brown, Ken Peplowski and the Four Freshmen to perform in the restaurant which seats only about 100 people. Wadsworth said, “The only way to book someone in a smaller venue is to catch them when they are in the territory and when they need work. You make the best offer you can.”

The formula worked. As the 21st century began, Night Town was the only Cleveland club presenting top national artists on a regular basis. “We have occasions,” said Wadsworth, “when a millionaire is sitting next to a postman and they’re both having a great time together. Where else does that happen?”

In 2002, Downbeat magazine named Night Town in Cleveland Heights one of the top 100 jazz clubs in the world!

Wadsworth admitted it had become difficult for jazz clubs to continue to exist but said, “The role of the clubs is essential in nurturing talent and providing a workshop for musicians to bring their work along. Some of the most exciting moments in jazz are in the nightclub-type environment.”

### Some Long-running Cleveland Jazz Clubs

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<th>Agora Ballroom</th>
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