

The original House of Blues

In the early '70s, Mother Blues on Lemmon Avenue was where it was at.

by Kirby F. Warnock

FROM THE 1970S THROUGH THE EARLY '80s, Mother Blues was the hottest club in town and most of Texas. "There were three clubs that had that certain vibe when you walked into them," said Texas blues guitarist Bugs Henderson in a 2010 interview. "The Cellar in Fort Worth, the Armadillo in Austin and Mother Blues."

It was the hangout for every major rock and roll act that rolled through north Texas. The list of stars that headed to Mother Blues after a concert in Dallas or Fort Worth could fill the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame — Bruce Springsteen, Led Zeppelin, Alice Cooper, Steve Miller, Boz Scaggs, Bad Company and the Texas blues master Freddy King. The special upstairs room was their private enclave, but you couldn't buy a ticket into it for any amount of money.

You had to be either incredibly cool, possess the really good drugs, or be a nubile, hot, young groupie. In other words, the price of admission was sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. For a while it was the hippest, hottest, place to be. At the same time it was also the dirtiest and most dangerous, but everyone who was anybody in the rock 'n' roll hierarchy could be seen there.

Mother Blues was the brainchild of Bill Simonson and Larry Bradford. Bill was the owner and main catalyst, while Larry was "the responsible one" of the duo. Bill looked like a very young Tom Hanks, with a bushel of brown, curly hair, piercing blue eyes and an impish smile. He opened the club in a house on Rawlins, and then moved it into an old, two-story house on Lemmon Avenue. (The actual location is now occupied by a car wash and strip mall.)

The interior looked basically like the old house it was and even still had a functioning fireplace. Downstairs was where the main club was located, with a small stage, chairs, tables, booths, a pool table, a big bar and a patio out back. Upstairs was the private area, reserved only for those people that Bill told the bouncers to let pass.

There was live music every night, provided by the dozens of bar bands that inhabited Dallas in the early '70s. The US Kids, The Toys, The James Buck Band, Full Force, Maple, Brat, Lynx, Cottonmouth, Lightning and Smokin' Joe Kubek. Each night they cranked out cover tunes of Kansas, Led Zeppelin or Cheap Trick to a crowd of young people.

"It was a place that was really good to musicians," said Bugs Henderson. "Bill and Larry were more than just club owners. They cared about the music, so everybody wanted to play there."

While there were several other bars in Dallas and Fort Worth that followed this format (Sneaky Pete's, The Binary Star,

The availability of drugs and ready sex were what attracted headline rock stars to the place. Besides the obvious cocaine connection, there was always a bevy of teen-aged girls looking to sleep with a rock star. Most of them were topless dancers from clubs like Youngbloods, The Fare or The Doll House, but several were

that if they came to Mother Blues, they would be taken care of. It is a testimony to Bill's talents that he got Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band to play their very first Dallas performance at his sister club, Gertie's. He also took a chance on Jimmie Vaughan's new band, The Fabulous Thunderbirds, as well as book-

play a game he called Loosey Deucey," recalled Bugs Henderson in a 2011 interview. "It was seven-card stud, but with deuces, Jokers, and the low card in the hole split wild the pot. A regular poker hand wouldn't win the thing. You usually needed something like five aces.

The influence of Freddy King

Savvy's) Bill's genius was that on weekends he kept Mother Blues open after hours until 5:00 am. The trick was that he had to quit serving alcohol after 2:00 am, the cut-off time established by the Texas Alcohol & Beverage Commission. Bill booked bands to come onstage at midnight and play until 5 am. He still charged a cover, so you couldn't get in for free, but you couldn't drink alcohol. What this arrangement did was to pack the house with young people doing drugs, not booze.

After hours

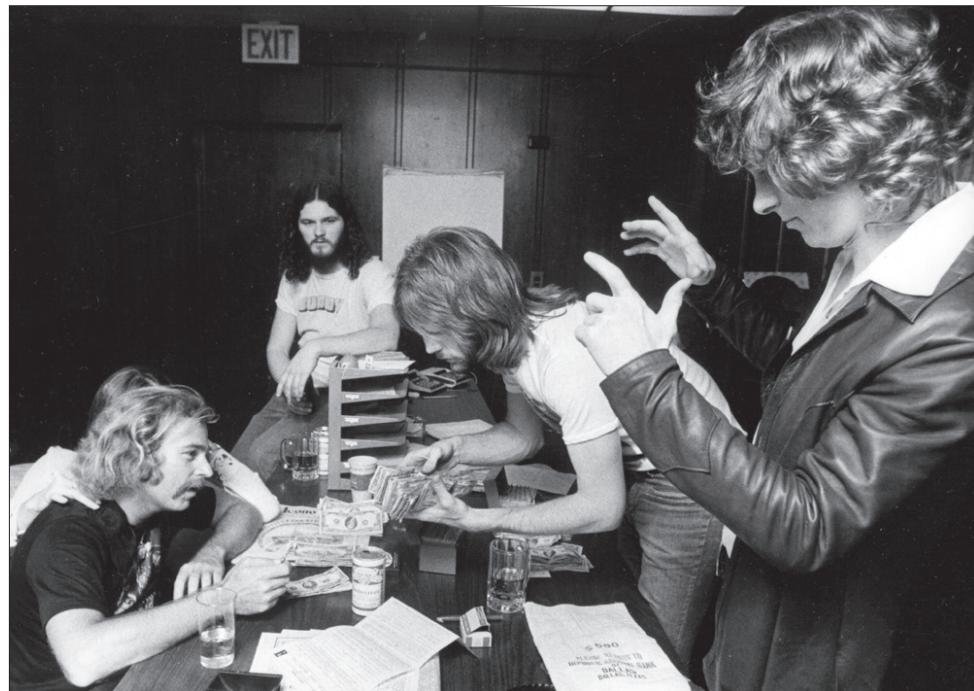
"WHEN ALL THE OTHER BARS in Dallas closed at 2 AM, everyone headed to Mother Blues," recalls Dallas musician James Buck. "There was a whole second wave of people that came in then, and they were mostly the drug users. It got pretty wild there for a while."

If you showed up after 2 AM without drugs, you could ask a waitress if anything was available. She would walk around from table to table, inquiring if anything was for sale. If there were some prospects she would come back and tell you the deal ("Coke, \$100 a gram.") You would hand her your money and in a while she would return with the drugs. Let me hasten to add that this was *not* at the direction of Bill Simonson, but Bill didn't do anything to discourage it.

Mother Blues was also the first Dallas club I can remember that welcomed the gay and the trans-gendered. There was a particular young transvestite who was a regular there. The club also attracted the slightly weird, like the guy known as Space Dancer, who would appear and dance some pretty *avant-garde* movements—always alone.



They were often the special guests in the Mother Blues upstairs office: Willis Alan Ramsey (left), John Nitzinger and Freddie King (center)



He helped frame the photo as his partner Larry Bradford paid off Jimmy Buffett with Jay Jones looking on: Mother Blues owner Bill Simonson

high-school-age girls from Hurst, Bedford or Mesquite. Because the drinking age was 18, it was not too hard for "mature-looking" 16-year-olds to gain entrance. And enter they did.

This reputation for easy sex and drugs reeled in Led Zeppelin whenever they were in town. Robert Plant was a regular there, as was Jimmy Page. There was the night that John Nitzinger, Freddy King and Willis Alan Ramsey showed up on the same evening and headed up to the private second story. Ron McKeown snapped a picture of the composer of "Muskrat Love" hanging out with the bluesy white boy, John Nitzinger and the king of the Texas blues, Freddy King.

Bill was able to get the word out to booking agents, limo drivers and the rock stars themselves

ing jazz acts like Chuck Mangione, Ramsey Lewis, Mose Allison and a crazy performer who headed up a band called The Texas Jewboys, Kinky Friedman.

VIP poker

HOWEVER, IF THERE WAS one person who typified the Ma Blues atmosphere, it was Freddy King. Not only did Bill regularly book Freddy at Mother Blues and his other club, Gertie's, he allowed Freddy to hang out upstairs as much as he wanted. It was up there that Freddy would get into poker games that didn't end until dawn, or until Freddy had won all of his money back, whichever came first.

Those all-night card games became the stuff of legends. When Jimmy Buffett played Mother Blues at the height of his "Margaritaville" fame he was paid in a huge wad of cash. Shortly after counting out his door receipts and signing for them, Buffett got into one of the poker games and wound up losing every penny of it, including the belt buckle he was wearing.

"It was all he had left, so he pulled it off and laid it on the table," recalled Ron McKeown.

"Freddy liked to

cannot be properly charted anymore than you could measure every tiny ripple from a stone tossed into a pond. It has led me to believe that he was possibly the most influential rock and blues guitar player to ever live. Let's just look at part of the Freddy King tree: Steve Miller and Boz Scaggs were regulars at his Dallas home when they were in high school here. John Nitzinger and Bugs Henderson were regulars at his gigs. Eric Clapton started out his career copying Freddy's instrumental hit, "Hideaway," even recording his own version of it while he was with John Mayall's Blues Breakers. Eddie Van Halen grew up copying Eric Clapton's licks. Jimmie Vaughan learned from Freddy, then taught his younger brother Stevie. As to how many guitarists started their careers by copying Eric Clapton, Eddie Van Halen, Stevie Ray Vaughan or Jimmie Vaughan, we may never know.

"I don't think people today understand how important he was, or how many players were in the audience whenever he got onstage," recalled the late Bugs Henderson in a 2010 interview.

Besides having a network of musicians, Bill was also a master club owner with an eye towards the bottom line. No matter how wasted he was, it was said that he could always count the closing night's receipts flawlessly. He was helped immensely by his manager, Larry Bradford, and his girlfriend, Nikky. (To this day I still

don't know Nikky's last name.) They propped him up when he had too much to drink, drove him home and generally made certain he didn't fall off the edge.

This was a full-time job, because Bill led a self-destructive life fueled by drugs and liquor.

"The best and worst thing that ever happened to Mother Blues was when they lowered the drinking age in Texas to 18," recalled Stoney Burns. "Bill told me that six months after that happened, he was driving a new Mercedes."

However, the police couldn't help but notice the drug activity.

"One night after 2 AM, the cops came over the fence in the backyard, where the patio was. Everyone just started emptying their pockets onto the ground," recalls James Buck.

Bill Simonson got busted. He did some prison time, came back out and tried to open a club in Fort Worth called Dance Land, but by now the thrill was gone. It closed down just a few months after opening. There was another attempt to re-open Mother Blues in a different location, but it too closed quickly.

I got another job and lost touch with Bill Simonson, Stoney Burns and the other Mother Blues regulars until one day I heard that Bill had died from a brain tumor. He was cremated, and his ashes scattered somewhere in Colorado.

Stoney died of a heart attack a year ago.

The house that was Mother Blue's was purchased and demolished. A car wash and a small strip center went up. There was no reminder of the wildest, craziest, hippest club in Texas except the memories of thousands of baby-boomers who went there when they were in their late teens and early twenties.

The photographs are about the only things that capture that moment in time when rock 'n' roll and the blues were serious business, not just a private box at the newest "venue."

I guess you really had to be there. ■

There is a Mother Blues reunion planned for May 12 at the Lakewood Theater featuring the Original band members of Cherry Smash (Robert Slavid and Steve Hankins), US Kids (Jim Zachery, Mike Schwedler, Steve Willisma, Eddie Lowe, Don Walker), The CliffHangers (Larry Samford, Craig Marlow and Robert Wier), Dead Pirates Society (Joe Kennedy, Mark Hamilton, John Staehely, Jimmie Randall), Nitzinger (Bobby Wilcox, Greg Gaunt and John Nitzinger), The Stratoblasters (with Jimmy Wallace, John O'Daniel, Jerry Branch, Matt Tapp, Ron Thompson and Randy Cates) and many more.