

Michael's Rock and Roll Posse: All Roads Lead Through Houston—Houston's Musical History

<https://www.houstonhistoryalliance.org/houston-history-conference/2016-houston-history-conference/>

I know, I know, I have been lying low for a bit, but I swear it is only because I am so slammed with my UHD duties that leave me so little time to catch up, especially as the new school year started. But I did hide out in plain sight yesterday at an extraordinary conference organized by the Houston History Alliance, "The History of Houston's Musical Soul," which was a 3 day affair, including a great deal of music making and quite wonderful narratives on twentieth century Houston and its musical roots, some of which I knew but not all. I lost track of time at the various panels, and I would rank the scholarly and community focus as good as almost any conference I have ever attended on any topic. There was literally not a bad or boring speaker in the house, and the hidden gems just washed over me. I understand the HHA will be making its tapings available, and I promise to pass them on the minute they are available. I saw some former students, friends, and colleagues there, and I will only channel surf for you, but you will get the gist.

Houston, the Action Town – in this keynote by Joe Nick Patoski (author of books and/or movies on Selena, Sir Douglas, Willie Nelson and others), I watched a master at work. I have known Joe Nick for years and have learned a great deal about his musical history work, and about barbeque (he was the first Barbeque Editor of Texas Monthly Magazine, one of the best jobs in the world, second only to my various endeavors). Watching the various lines just pour out him reminds me of the kind of speaking style I favor and rarely see: completely, deeply authoritative with great synthetic ability, from someone who is just fascinated with his subject and conveys it eagerly and generously. He tied together various imported and indigenous musical strains, and set out almost all the themes that unfurled during the event. I also vowed I will bring him back to speak at UHD on my watch, and to rollout his new documentary film on Doug Sahm, a Houston singer—recorded in Houston, a theme throughout the day—with 4 Chicano musicians who sold themselves as part of the British Invasion by affecting an English persona in service of the class "She's About a Mover." It turns out, like Houston itself, most of these singers came from somewhere else, found fertile soil

and an ability to record and perfect their art, including many not thought of as having Houston ties or roots. The cast of characters was across all genres and forms of music: (in no order) Arnett Cobb, Lightnin' Hopkins, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, Freddy Fender, George Jones, Roger Miller, J.P. "Big Bopper" Richardson, Beyoncé Knowles and Destiny's Child, Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton, Johnny Ace, Junior Parker, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Roy Head, B.J. Thomas, Lydia Mendoza and dozens more, well-known and less so, but no less authoritative. Interestingly, ZZ Top is the only rock and roll band from Houston to have made it into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, so it is hard to call Houston a birthplace of many rock and roll roots, although many Houstonians or former Houstonians rock—they have just done so elsewhere, as have a number of Broadway talents, such as Tommy Tune. I am not a fan of cajun or zydeco music, or for that matter, country or hillbilly, but Houston has been the epicenter of these regional musical traditions as well, eclipsing even New Orleans, and sending many area residents to Nashville and Memphis—many who were graduates of the Houston High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, such as jazz musicians Jason Moran and Shelley Carroll. Arnett Cobb's daughter was on a panel, as were several musicians who performed to explain their craft and roots. I just did not get a chance to see Ruben Duran's documentary "Texas Zydeco," but I will do so, maybe if it were to play with Joe Nick's Doug Sahm film. Hell, I might just get them both for UHD while I am still there.

The anchors of this vertically-integrated musical economy were SugarHill Recording Studio (also known by almost a dozen other names, most notably Gold Star Studios, owned by the pioneering Bill Quinn and Huey Meaux)—which just produced Lee Ann Womack's newest cd; and the Peacock Studio and record label and Buffalo Booking Agency (which booked and produced most of the chitling circuit musicians). Don Robey and Evelyn Johnson were the founders of the first major Black-owned enterprises, predating by decades the iconic Motown (Black) and Sun Studio (White) recording and producing companies. Venues such as the El Dorado Ballroom (which I drive by on my way to UHD every morning), Rockefeller's, the Continental Club, many Latin cantinas, ice-houses, and ballrooms were places where the joints were jumping. Rap and hip hop have flourished in Houston (The Geto Boys and the influential late DJ Screw), centered at Screwed Up Records and Tapes.

The musical archives at UH and Rice are growing, and provide much of the documentary and digitized sources for scholarship in these fertile fields, and there was a fascinating panel on some of these collections. “Houston Through The Decades” Pop-up Museum was a fascinating collection of early and rare records and mix tapes. It was also an interactive resource, interviewing all who had memories, as well as some of the earlier musicians. I recorded about 15 minutes about my own musical memories, including nights where I saw and heard Gatemouth Brown, Bobby “Blues” Bland, and Roy Orbison, all three extraordinary talents, in venues where there were not even a dozen patrons. Tina and I once attended a Roy Orbison show at the old Rockefeller’s, with 8 of us in the audience. I cried both at his music and at the ignominious turn of events. If there is anything that has likely doomed Houston as a musical destination or epicenter, it surely is its role as an unsupportive concert town—then and now.

One commentator said, "Houston, historically, has not been acknowledged for the influential role it has played in the development of America's music history," he says. "Particularly African-American music history. This was home to what was, at the time, the largest black-owned record label in the country. Houston ranks with Memphis, Chicago and New Orleans as one of the incubators of the blues and rhythm and blues." Houston is ripe for a transformative step to reclaim and document its musical history, in a city that is so transient that it has no collective memory of its exquisite musical soul and character. Given all its museums and organizations, it is now astounding to me that no single entity has grown to gather and situate all these courses flowing through its bayous.

The musical archives at UH and Rice are growing, and provide much of the documentary and digitized sources for scholarship in these fertile fields, and there was a fascinating panel on some of these collections. There were stacks of books, and I snuck away buying only one House of Hits, The Story of Houston’s Gold Star/SugarHill Recording Studios; the authors Andy Bradley and Roger Wood were there, exemplifying the staggering quality of presentations and presenters—academics, family member, musicians, disc-jockeys, producers, and all of them aficionados. I also discovered a recent UH history PhD, Natalie Garza, who teaches at HCC and gave an outstanding presentation on the evolution of Chicana musicians, conjunto, and orquesta Tejana—I had read an article by her on the subject in the 2013 Houston History journal, and she is a real talent. Also watch for

the name Maco Faniel, a doctoral student at Rutgers whose expertise is Houston rap and hip hop. It is spirit-affirming to hear these young scholars whose best work is not far off. As I noted—it is rare when every single speaker was at the top of his or her game, and I am not exaggerating.

As a museum resource, the “Houston Through The Decades” Pop-up Museum was a fascinating collection of early and rare records and mix tapes. It was also an interactive resource, interviewing all who had memories, as well as some of the earlier musicians. I recorded about 15 minutes about my own Houston musical memories, including nights where I saw and heard Gatemouth Brown, Bobby “Blues” Bland and Roy Orbison, all extraordinary talents at the apex of their talent but the decline of their careers, in venues where there were not even a dozen patrons. (And fittingly, all three venues are themselves gone.) Tina and I attended a Roy Orbison show at the old Rockefeller’s, with 8 of us in the audience. If there is anything that has likely doomed Houston as a musical destination or epicenter, it surely is not its role as a great concert town—then or now.

One commentator said, "Houston, historically, has not been acknowledged for the influential role it has played in the development of America's music history," he says. "Particularly African-American music history. This was home to what was, at the time, the largest black-owned record label in the country. Houston ranks with Memphis, Chicago and New Orleans as one of the incubators of the blues and rhythm and blues." Houston is ripe for a transformative step to reclaim and document its musical history, in a city that is so transient that it has no collective memory of its exquisite musical soul and character. Given all its museums and organizations (even the Houston Blues Museum), it is now astounding to me that no single entity has grown to gather and situate all these courses flowing through its bayous.

That will have to happen under someone else’s leadership, but it would be a worthy project, and if it does happen, I will have been there when the idea was planted at the MATCH Theater. I am a very lucky boy, all over again.

More later, after the upcoming Elvis Costello and Adele concerts.

Michael

Saturday, October 1

“The History of Houston’s Musical Soul” MATCH Theater 3, 3400 Main Street
9:am – 9:20:

Welcome – Cecelia Ottenweller, Houston History Alliance

The History of Houston’s Musical Soul – Sean Fitzpatrick, Jung Center
9:20 – 9:50:

Houston, the Action Town – Keynote by Joe Nick Patoski
10:00 – 10:55:

From Texas Tenors to Oilin’ Up: the Soul of Houston Jazz – Rick Mitchell, Robert Morgan, Lizette Cobb, Shelley Carrol, Craig Green

11:05 – 12:pm:

Playing Both Sides of the Tracks: Houston R&B and Honky-Tonk in the Mid-20th Century featuring a mini performance by Johnny Bush, country singer, musician and drummer and author of the Willie Nelson hit song, “Whiskey River” – Rick Mitchell, Roger Wood, John Nova Lomax

12:00 – 12:15:

Houston History Educator Award, Houston History Hero Award

12:15 – 1:30:

Lunch catered by Triple J Barbecue , accordion and washboard combo in the atrium

1:30 – 2:30:

From Rhythm and Blues to Chopped and Screwed...and Folk Music, Too! Popular Music Collections in UH and Rice Libraries – Vince Lee, Julie Grob, Mary Manning, Norie Guthrie

2:40 – 3:30:

The Evolution of Latino Music in Houston – Natalie Garza, Alex LaRotta, Robert Rodriguez, Nick Gaitan, Joe Nick Patoski

3:40 – 4:30:

Houston’s House of Hits: The Eight-decade Legacy of SugarHill Studios – Dan Workman, Andrew Bradley, Roger Wood

4:40 – 5:30:

The Roots of Houston Hip Hop – Maco Faniel, Lance Scott Walker, Jason “Flash Gordon Parks” Woods

6:00 – Until??

“Quit Talking – Start Partying!” Party at Continental Club Complex featuring Trudy Lynn, also DJs at Natachee’s.