

MEGAN BARRY
MAYOR



METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT OF NASHVILLE AND DAVIDSON COUNTY

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STAFF RECOMMENDATION
2614 Jefferson Street, Club Baron
September 21, 2016

Application: Historic Landmark Overlay for 2614 Jefferson Street, Club Baron

Map and Parcel Numbers: 09202009400

Council Districts: 21

Applicant: Councilman Ed Kindall

Project Lead: Robin Zeigler, robin.zeigler@nashville.gov, 615-862-7970

<p>Description of Project: Councilman Ed Kindall requests a Historic Landmark overlay for 2614 Jefferson Street, Club Baron.</p>	<p>Attachments A: Photographs B: Articles</p>
<p>Recommendation Summary: Staff suggests that the MHZC recommend to Council approval of a Historic Landmark overlay for 2614 Jefferson Street and to use the existing design guidelines for Historic Landmarks to guide future alterations, finding the building meets section 1, 2 and 5 of ordinance 17.36.120.</p>	

Applicable Ordinance:

Article III. Historic Overlay Districts

17.36.120 Historic Districts Defined. B. Historic Landmark. An historic landmark is defined as a building, structure, site or object, its appurtenances and the property it is located on, of high historical, cultural, architectural or archaeological importance; whose demolition or destruction would constitute an irreplaceable loss to the quality and character of Nashville and Davidson County; and that meets one or more of the following criteria:

1. The historic landmark is associated with an event that has made a significant contribution to local, state or national history;
2. It is associated with the lives of persons significant in local, state or national history;
3. It embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction, or that represents the work of a master, or that possesses high artistic value;
4. It has yielded or may be likely to yield archaeological information important in history or prehistory; or
5. It is listed or is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

Background:

The concrete block building constructed on Jefferson Street in 1955 originally housed an R&B nightclub known as "Club Baron" and the Brown Pharmacy, operated by African-American druggist Jackson H. Brown. Today, serves as the Elk's Lodge bar. According to Rock and Roll GPS

(www.rockandrollgps.com/jimi-hendrix-in-nashville),

Club Baron is where Jimi Hendrix allegedly challenged Johnny Jones to a guitar duel and lost. Club Baron is the only building left on Jefferson, out of a collection of live-music venues such as the Del, the New Era, the Club Revillot, Maceo's, Sugar Hill, Deborah's Casino Royale, Ebony Circle and Pee Wee's. The Club hosted musicians such as Little Richard, B.B. King, and Ray Charles, Fats Domino & the Domino Orchestra, Sonny Thompson & the Thompson Band featuring Lula Reed, The Five Royales Band, Jimmy Coe's Orchestra, Muddy Waters, Roy Brown Band, Etta James, Bill Doggett, Little Walter, Isley Brothers, Jay Hawkins, Jackie Wilson, Ruth McFadden, Arthur Prysock, Larry Birdsong, Bennie King, The Chantels, Otis Redding, and Marvin Gaye.

In addition to providing live music, the building served multiple other purposes. It was home to the city's black-only skating rink as well as various teen shows. (Nashville's white-only skating rink was the Hippodrome Roller Rink on West End Avenue.)



Figure 1: Elks Lodge today.

The Elks, a national fraternal order, has owned the former Club Baron building for the past three decades. It is used for Elks meetings five times a month as well as for Elks events on weekend nights.

Analysis & Findings:

The building is significant for its connection to Nashville's African-American music scene from the 1950s and 60s and hosted many of the musicians who had a strong influence on American music. For these reasons the building meets standard 1 and 2 of section 17.36.120. Meeting these standards also means that the building is eligible for listing in the National Register of

Historic Places and therefore meets section 5 of the ordinance.

Recommendation:

Staff suggests that the MHZC recommend to Council approval of a Historic Landmark overlay for 2614 Jefferson Street and to use the existing design guidelines for Historic Landmarks to guide future alterations, finding the building meets section 1, 2 and 5 of ordinance 17.36.120.

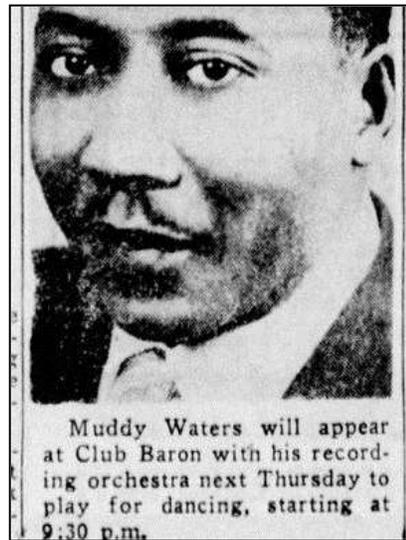


Figure 2: *Tennessean* archives

PHOTOGRAPHS



Thompson Band At Club Baron

Sonny Thompson and his band, featuring Lula Reed and Paul Tate, singers, will play for a floor show and dance tonight at Club Baron, 26th avenue and Jefferson street. The concert will begin at 9 o'clock.

Domino Orchestra

Fats Domino and his band will play for a concert at 9 o'clock Monday nights at Club Baron, 26th and Jefferson streets.

Etta James Group To Give Club Show

Etta James and Her Peaches, one of the currently popular singing groups which has recorded widely, will appear for two nights, Tuesday and Wednesday, Dec. 13 and 14, at Club Baron. They will give three shows nightly, and Louie Brooks and his orchestra will supply music for dancing beginning at 9 o'clock.



BIG IN-PERSON

★ SHOW & DANCE ★

Club Baron | Hippodrome

Sun., June 5

10 p.m. 'til

Wed., June 8

8 p.m. 'til



Screamin'
Jay
Hawkins



Isley Bros.



Jimmy
Jones

Al Brown and THE TUNE TOPPERS
(THE MADISON)

\$1.50

\$2.00

Club Baron Slates White Program

Ray Charles and his orchestra will present a special program for white patrons, at the Club Baron, 2614 Jefferson st., Wednesday night.

The Club Baron, usually restricted to Negro patrons, will have a show for Negroes tomorrow. Shows start at 9 p.m. (CDT).

Source of images: *Tennessean* Archives

ARTICLES

“Jimi Hendrix in Nashville” from Rock and Roll GPS (www.rockandrollgps.com/jimi-hendrix-in-nashville)

In the early 60's Jimi Hendrix spent some formative years on Jefferson Street in Nashville, TN. While in the army, Jimi Hendrix was stationed at Fort Campbell in Clarksville, TN near Nashville. He was discharged in 1962 and along with army buddy Billy Cox, headed to Nashville to form the band, King Kasuals. They became the house band at the Del Morocco. Legend has it that one night Jimi dragged his amp from the Del Morocco to the Club Baron down the street to challenge great Nashville bluesman, Johnny Jones in a guitar duel, only to be sent back to the Del Morocco with his tail between his legs a whipped young pup.

By 1968, the Del Morocco was demolished to make way for the interstate. The Jefferson Street Exit 207 off of I-40 now runs through where the club formerly stood. The Club Baron is still standing and is now the Elk's Lodge.

In Nashville, Jimi lived in an apartment above Joyce's House of Glamour (a beauty salon) on Jefferson Street near the Del Morocco. Like the Del Morocco, Joyce's met the fate of the wrecking ball to make way for the new interstate.

“Scuffling: The Local History of Nashville Rhythm and Blues” from *Nashville Scene*

scuffle \`skef-el\ *vi* 1: to contend with vigor and resolution 2: to strive or struggle at close quarters with disorder and confusion

One night in mid-November, I ventured across the Cumberland River from East Nashville and up to the Elks Lodge at 2614 Jefferson St. Denise LaSalle was booked into the Elks that night, and she was ready to sling her Southern contempo-blues and raunchy jokes across tables filled with mostly middle-aged fans looking to have a big time. Decker out and eager, waiting for LaSalle, they murmured approval when the pre-concert deejay played Marvin Gaye's "Got to Give It Up," then shouted out loud for Z.Z. Hill and his ever popular "Down Home Blues."

Seated at the bar in back, I looked out over the setups and paper sacks and tried to conjure some sense of the history buried there at the Elks. One of the few R&B nightclubs extant from 1950s Nashville—back when the building was known as the Club Baron—the Elks had been among the slew of Nashville hot spots that catered to a crowd more readily moved by Little Willie John than Little Jimmy Dickens. It was into the Baron, one story goes, that young Jimi Hendrix dragged his amp to duel axes with Johnny Jones, only to leave as a whipped guitar pup, taken to school by the great Nashville bluesman.

The Baron wasn't Jimi's turf, you see. He and Billy Cox led a combo down the street at the Del Morocco. A plush dinner club, the Del Morocco was owned by Theodore "Uncle Teddy" Acklen, a remarkable self-made man who scrambled up from the streets to one day play host to Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella. His son, Theodore Acklen Jr. ("Little Teddy" to his friends), has got the photos to prove it. There they sit, Robinson and Campanella, the two giants of summer in street clothes leaning over dinner at the Del Morocco.

The Baron, the Del, the New Era, the Club Revillot, Maceo's, Sugar Hill, Deborah's Casino Royale, Ebony Circle, Pee Wee's, even a beer joint called Behind the Green Door—the names are still fresh to

those who were doing the Madison Time on Jefferson Street when most of the world thought Nashville was *The Real McCoy*s embodied. Though you won't learn it from the rock 'n' roll history books, the Athens of the South was shaken nightly by North Nashville rhythm when the country music industry was just getting settled here. Country had the Opry, but Jefferson Street had Little Richard, the flame-in-residence at the Club Revillot when he was "just scuffling," as Acklen Jr. puts it, and still singing the original lyrics to "Tutti Frutti."

"Tutti frutti, *good booty!*" are the precise words Acklen recalls.

But it wasn't just transplanted future legends like Little Richard and Jimi Hendrix who made the Nashville beat what it was, nor even the many pretenders-to-the-howl who seemed to have descended on Jefferson Street in the wake of Richard's rebirth. No, it was also artists like Roscoe Shelton, Earl Gaines, Arthur Gunter, Gene Allison, and Christine Kittrell, among many others, gifted singers who fell through history's cracks, perhaps for no better reason than they didn't record for Motown or Stax. Their records often appeared instead on tiny independent Nashville labels like Bullet, Tennessee, Republic, Excello, Calvert, or Cherokee; later for Athens, Sims, or Sound Stage 7. Often accompanying them were a shifting coterie of Nashville's unacclaimed finest, musicians who might have been called the A-team in another time on another street. Many are virtually unknown, even to the music city they once called home. But whether credited or not, this Nashville contingent contributed mightily to the backbeat of an era when the strange-labeled discs spinning in a thousand Southern jukeboxes—or over WLAC at night—told of which music was the music that mattered.

Only now, all these years later, Nashville's R&B legacy is beginning to gain wider recognition. AVI Records in the U.S. and Ace Records in England have both been deep into a reissue program of vintage recordings from the Excello vaults—much of it featuring Music City talent—and Ace also just released the essential *Across the Tracks: Nashville R&B and Rock 'n' Roll*. A superior collection of raw, urban-combo sides from the late '50s and early '60s, the Ace collection especially highlights the production and songwriting of local musician and all-around indie entrepreneur Ted Jarrett.

Given the extraordinary wealth of material that's surfacing, one can't help wondering how it ever got buried in the first place. Just how did Nashville come to be so completely equated with one style of music when so much else was going on? In many respects, that's an industry question, a conundrum that demands one probe the music half of the Music City equation. But then, there's also that other half—the city.

Located at 2417 Jefferson St. for over 30 years, the Del Morocco was opened in 1935 by Uncle Teddy Acklen, who first made his name as a pioneer in the Nashville numbers racket. Known, says his son, for running a scrupulously honest game (which to many people would have been the only moral issue of consequence), he also practiced the sort of one-on-one acts of community benevolence that blur the conventional lines of distinction between good works and bad enterprise.

"He helped a lot of kids get through school," says Acklen Jr., "particularly at Meharry, a lot of doctors."

When Acklen first bought the Del Morocco building, the upstairs was divided into private rooms the precise function of which is lost to history yet open to speculation. But Acklen soon tore out the walls and turned the upstairs into a swanky dining space forever known to Del Morocco patrons as the Blue Room. He hired top chefs, some of whom also worked the Belle Meade circuit, and before long the Del Morocco was serving dinner to the likes of Joe Louis, whose picture is also prominent in the Acklen family photo album.

Behind the Blue Room was the gambling room, an important feature of the Del Morocco but hardly one that made it unique among mid-century Nashville nightclubs, black or white. Indeed, in the 1940s and '50s, the Athens of the South was like an open city, its nightlife fueled by illegal whiskey and further quickened by the soft clatter of tumbling dice. At the Del Morocco, the soft sounds were just as likely also provided by a drummer's brushes. The music was at the front of the Blue Room, at first just a solo

singer or trio. But after Uncle Teddy married Ehrai “Muffy” Walker Acklen, a former dancer who had worked with Nat King Cole when he, too, was just scuffling, she gave her husband the idea of bringing elaborate stage shows into the club. The downstairs bar area was remodeled, a stage was built, and the Del Morocco started booking small-scale Vegas-type revues complete with singers, dancers, and comedians. The practice grew too expensive, however, and downstairs was soon given over exclusively to music, maybe a stripper or two.

It was also on that stage, downstairs at the Del Morocco, that Jimi Hendrix had a regular gig when he first arrived from Fort Campbell. Known in Nashville by the nickname “Marbles” (as in he’d lost them), Hendrix was already an over-the-top, musically eccentric showman given to playing guitar with his teeth—and/or whatever other extremity might get the audience riled. No one took him seriously.

“Everybody kind of didn’t think Jimi had it all then,” says Acklen Jr. “He was so far ahead of his time... And of course I found out he was a genius later on. Everybody found out.”

But if Hendrix was the Del Morocco’s one certifiable genius-in-the-making, he had stiff competition for status as the club’s most memorable character. Acklen has particularly engaging memories of a solo entertainer named Rudy Richardson, a popular fixture in the Blue Room who dyed his hair with shoe polish and had diamonds embedded in his navel. And some time after Hendrix left, downstairs was taken over by Ironing Board Sam, a one-man-show from Memphis who played a proto-electric keyboard attached to an ironing board. “He had it hooked up to the amps and everything,” says Acklen. The last that Acklen saw of Ironing Board Sam was some years later in New Orleans. “He was on television doing a Houdini trick. Like to killed hisself. You know, he was in a tank of water, gonna play an organ upside-down or something.”

The Del Morocco had its share of out-of-town stars come through and jam—Uncle Teddy’s friend Count Basie being one—and many more who would go there to relax after playing at Tennessee State or Sulphur Dell. If the right mood struck, the celebrities might get up onstage and sing until early morning.

“I mean I’ve seen Aretha play a piano till they fall down,” Acklen says.

Nevertheless, the New Era was really the club most known for hosting the R&B chartbusters of the day. Aretha, B.B. King, Jerry Butler, Joe Tex—all made stops at the New Era. Etta James recorded her barn-burning *Etta James Rocks the House* album at the New Era in 1963. The album opens with the emcee crying out, “Ladies and Gentlemen, it’s star time!”

Thirty-three years later, those words reflect on the club’s former owner, William Sousa “Soo” Bridgeforth, as much as they do on Etta James. An alert, 89-year-old North Nashville legend, Soo Bridgeforth commands the respect of a community elder, his entry into a room changing nearby conversation and inspiring a litany of sincere inquiries as to his health and well-being this lovely afternoon. Besides being involved with the New Era for over 50 years, Bridgeforth, like Acklen, was also deeply involved with Negro League baseball. Scuffling along, losing the money he made by other means, he owned, for a time, the Birmingham Black Barons, a team for which Charley Pride once pitched. Bridgeforth remembers Pride as a 19-year-old kid who’d sit up on the bus all night, strumming his guitar while his teammates tried to sleep.

The grandson of former slaves, Bridgeforth grew up plowing a 280-acre Alabama farm his grandparents acquired and maintained after gaining their freedom. In 1925, when Soo was 18, an uncle who was a masonry contractor brought him to Nashville and taught him to lay bricks for a living. Six years later the family farm was sold. Bridgeforth received his mother’s share of the proceeds, and in 1932 he used that money to buy a pool hall at 17th and Charlotte. Two pool rooms later, in 1939, he opened the original New Era near the corner of Fourth and Charlotte. And in 1941, Bridgeforth moved the New Era onto Fourth Avenue proper, to a building that stood where the Municipal Auditorium now looms.

It was on the second floor of the second location that Bridgeforth started booking name entertainers. The New Era was more or less a piano bar that “would seat about a hundred people,” he says. Initially, the acts he lined up were piano-blues performers like Pvt. Cecil Gant (who once recorded a tune called “Nashville Jumps”), Ivory Joe Hunter, Amos Milburn, and Memphis Slim. They had no trouble filling the hundred seats—not only because a guy like Milburn could make a solo piano rock like a 12-piece orchestra, but also because Fourth Avenue between Cedar/Charlotte (the two streets met at Fourth) and Gay Streets was a major hot spot for black Nashville, easily as active as Jefferson Street. The New Era was a focal point, but located on that same stretch of Fourth Avenue were several other important venues and businesses, including Grady’s, a club favored by Fats Domino when he passed through town, and the Bijou Theater, where Bessie Smith used to sing of her “Empty Bed Blues.” By the time Bridgeforth moved the New Era onto the block, the Bijou’s regular attraction was Jerry Jackson’s vaudeville revue, a weekly extravaganza that employed such future Nashville stars as Roscoe Shelton and 3-year-old Bobby Hebb.

“Downtown was a good location,” Bridgeforth says. “It was about the only place that blacks could go. And it was kind of a meeting place when they’d come to town. They would all wind up at the New Era.”

“There were four cab companies in one block,” adds singer Christine Kittrell. “And let me tell you something, it was hard as hell to catch a cab.... You’d better walk up on Cedar Street and try to hail you a cab somewhere, ’cause the cabs weren’t there.... They were busy.”

A precocious entertainer who hit the road with Big Joe Turner when she was just 13 years old, Kittrell spent many a downtown night at both the Bijou and the New Era. “Soo ran a clean club,” she explains. “No vulgarity, no fighting.... It just wasn’t permitted. He did not tolerate it. He just didn’t tolerate it. And they knew that, and therefore there was never any problem. Once in a great while...some fool would slap a woman or something in there, and before God could get the news, he was gone.”

What Kittrell once called “the greatest night of my life” occurred at the New Era. Dared by a friend, she took the stage accompanied by Jimmy Lewis, a Nashville musician who later joined Count Basie as his bass player. “I’ll never forget, I sang ‘Danny Boy’ that night,” Kittrell recalls. “I sang ‘Danny Boy,’ and Jimmy played guitar, instead of bass, on that particular song.”

There to hear her performance were deejay Hoss Allen of WLAC and songwriter Ted Jarrett, who was then working for Tennessee Records. “The next day I received a call from Ted to come to South Nashville to meet with Mr. Bubis [of Tennessee Records],” Kittrell says. A contract was signed, and in short order Kittrell would have a major R&B hit with “Sittin’ Here Drinkin’,” a number she wrote off-the-cuff because that’s what she happened to be doing during a break in her session—sitting there drinkin’.

Nashville was like that in the early 1950s. The step up from the street to the studio was a lot shorter than it is today. At the time, the record industry was barely past adolescence in a town already calling itself—with considerable nerve—Music City U.S.A. Though more and more country sessions were being cut on the cheap in the Opry’s hometown, they were, with some important exceptions, primarily supervised by A&R men visiting from New York or Los Angeles. In many respects Nashville was still an indie town, with much of its music business conducted by scuffling entrepreneurs like Jim Bulleit, an ex-WSM announcer who started Bullet Recording and Transcription Company in 1945. His label scored one of the biggest smashes in Music City history with “Near You,” a million-selling pop hit that spent 17 weeks at No. 1 in 1947. Picked up by Milton Berle as his theme song, it was recorded by dance band leader Francis Craig, until that time best known in Nashville for his regular gig in the Hermitage Hotel.

Bullet was Nashville’s first independent label of note, but it was soon followed by others. Ted Jarrett’s entree into the business was provided by Tennessee Records, a Nashville indie that went into business in 1949 and evolved into Republic Records three years later. Tennessee was owned by the cousins Alan and Reynold Bubis in partnership with William Beasley and Howard Allison. The label’s primary focus was country, initially, but Tennessee also recorded the Radio Four, a superb gospel outfit fronted by Dr.

Morgan D. Babb, today the owner of local AM radio station WMDB. That's how Jarrett came into the picture, for the first job he was given at Tennessee Records was as road manager for the Radio Four.

Perhaps more than any individual, Ted Jarrett personifies the scuffling and striving and fortune and failure of the city's R&B industry. Raised by a grandfather who didn't believe in education for blacks, he was returned to Nashville to live with his poverty-stricken mother when his desire for schooling raised his grandfather's ire. Interested, even as a child, in poetry and songwriting, Jarrett took piano lessons financed by a man who owned the bowling alley where he worked. He graduated from Pearl High, attended Fisk for a year, then was drafted into the navy. After his discharge, Jarrett returned to Nashville to complete his college education and to make it in music. The 1951 City Directory lists Theo. Jarrett as "writer." He was, you might say, a bit out in front of local trends.

Before long, Jarrett had his practiced musical hands in every aspect of the business he had so wanted to enter. Writer, producer, musician, talent scout, he even emceed a popular weekly talent show at the Bijou Theater. He also helped put together the initial programming for WSOK (now WVOL), the pioneering black radio station that went on the air in Nashville in 1951. "I had the first show, kiddie show, 'Teenie Weenie Time,' " he says.

But like any A&R man worth his cut of the action, Jarrett stayed close to the clubs. "That's where I used to find everybody," he says. While playing piano at Sugar Hill, a tiny joint on Kellogg Street, Jarrett discovered Larry Birdsong, an underage singer just then fresh out of reform school. He also discovered Gene Allison, a gospel-rooted performer said to have been greatly admired by James Brown and Sam Cooke. Initially reluctant to sing if not for the Lord, Allison would eventually hit the secular Top Ten with Jarrett's near-sanctified "You Can Make It If You Try." Later covered by the Rolling Stones, the song most recently surfaced as the theme for a BMW commercial in Germany.

Both Birdsong and Allison—as well as most of the other singers who entered Jarrett's universe—recorded for, among other labels, a succession of small imprints started by Jarrett and Alan Bubis after both had left Tennessee/Republic Records. Calvert, Champion, Cherokee: It's these and a few other indies—individually so obscure as to make a successful R&B label like Chess look like Time-Warner—that are showcased on the new *Across the Tracks* import CD. Collectively, they reveal Jarrett as a producer with his own distinct sound, his head arrangements, at least on the earlier cuts, often cohering around driving horn charts and the urgent vocals of Birdsong, Allison, or Earl Gaines, among others. The bandleader was usually saxophonist Jimmy Beck, whose ebullient instrumental "Pipe Dreams" was one of the few Champion sides actually to sell a fair number of copies. Some of those copies must have made it to the islands, for the horn arrangement on "Pipe Dreams" sounds like a swirling ancestor of everything the great Jamaican ska band the Skatalites would be doing in the 1960s.

But given the arbitrariness of that whole era, many of the singers with whom Jarrett worked also recorded for the most important R&B label in Nashville history: Excello Records. The brainchild of record store owner Ernie Young, Excello was conceived in 1952 as a sister label to Nashboro, the gospel imprint that Young had created a year before. Both labels were housed at Ernie's Record Mart, 177-79 3rd Ave. N., and stories abound as to the crowded, makeshift conditions under which Excello and Nashboro records got made.

"He had a thing going there that the gospel groups always cut downstairs on the floor as you walk in the door," says Roscoe Shelton, whose *Roscoe Shelton Sings* is one of the highlights of the AVI reissue series. "He would just close the doors, pull the curtains at night, and set a microphone up in the floor there.... But the R&B, blues and everything, was cut upstairs. Very small studio.... Ernie never had a lot of space, but he managed. He really got some good sound out of the thing."

Over the years, interest in Excello has usually stemmed from its role as a purveyor of Louisiana swamp blues, a trend owing to Young's fortuitous leasing arrangement with Louisiana producer J.D. Miller. Though judiciously nicknamed bluesmen like Lightnin' Slim, Lonesome Sundown, and Slim Harpo brought Excello to the attention of blues freaks and English rockers, the Nashville singers and players who appeared on the label gave it its truer, more urban identity. For every Lonesome Sundown there was

an Earl Gaines, a stone soul Nashville stylist who could take a Ted Jarrett composition and turn it into a breakout smash to be one day heard at Carnegie Hall. That's precisely what happened in 1955, when Gaines nailed Jarrett's "It's Love Baby (24 Hours a Day)" for Excello and suddenly found himself touring America with Big Joe Turner and Bo Diddley.

On that hit, Gaines was accompanied by Louis Brooks and His Hi-Toppers, a variously named group of musicians who moved easily between the Bubis' world and Young's. Like Jarrett, with whom he had often played in the clubs, saxophonist Brooks had marked time as leader of the house act at Sugar Hill. Though Nashville lineups tended to be fluid, Brooks' core group included guitarist/bassist Ollie Brown, pianist Lovell "Knott" Phillips, fellow saxophonist Tommy McGhee, and a drummer named Billy Sherrill who did not, mind you, ever produce George Jones. At Tennessee and Republic, the Brooks group had often backed up Christine Kittrell when not waxing such earthy instrumentals of their own as "Wine Hangover" and (here's a self-confident title for you) "Almost Boogie."

"There was no other sound like Louis Brooks, believe me," Kittrell says. "Even to this day, I have not heard anybody come up with that sound."

Among the others who often played on Excello singles during the label's heyday were drummers Kid King, Sam "Good Rockin'" Beasley, and Charlie Dowell; bassist Clifford "Big Mac" McCray; guitarist Larry Taylor; and saxophonist T.H. Watson. Yet among the R&B studio players, the name mentioned most often by his surviving peers is that of pianist Skippy Brooks (no relation to Louis). His assured keyboard work anchors scores of Excello sides, including many of Roscoe Shelton's finest.

"Skippy Brooks was probably *the* best—well there's no probably about it—he was *the* blues pianist of Nashville back then," Shelton says. "This guy, he was tremendous. He was absolutely unbelievable."

"He was a real good player in every way," adds Larry Taylor. "He'd play society piano, or like cocktail lounge, or whatever. He was a good jazz player. He had all kinds of chord ideas."

He also had an open mind. For it was Brooks who brought Taylor, a white guitarist, to Excello to play behind Shelton and others. Taylor had migrated to Nashville from South Carolina, where he fell in love with R&B the best way a Caucasian could back then—via WLAC and its 50,000 watts of midnight blues.

"In South Carolina, I had a girlfriend whose name was Sarah Watson, and she didn't like country music," he says. "She liked to listen to 'LAC at night. We listened to Hoss Allen, and—other fella's name—John R. Got to know both those guys."

After arriving in Nashville, Taylor got to know Skippy Brooks at a demo session. Brooks then recruited Taylor ("Guitar Larry," as he sheepishly admits to having been called by his North Nashville friends) not only for studio work but also to play in Brooks' band at the 14th Avenue Elks, a predecessor of the club now situated on Jefferson Street. For Taylor, as for his friends, the 1950s color line could not withstand a decent riff.

"Those were good days...," he says. "I know there had to be racial strife here. But I just didn't see it. I used to eat at Miss Allison's every day at lunch; it was Gene Allison's mother's restaurant. I used to eat there every day at lunch. And I walked those streets and I played with those guys, never had a minute of trouble. Not a bit."

Representing the biracial milieu that was 1950s Music City at its best was Bobby Hebb, a former child performer who was as welcome on the Ryman Auditorium stage as he was at Ernie's Record Mart. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not arrive in the studio by way of the clubs. He and his older brother Harold were song-and-dance entertainers who, as kids, had worked the street corners and trolley cars as well as the Jerry Jackson revue at the Bijou Theater.

“They tapped at the Bijou on Sunday nights there at the show,” says their sister Helen, also a singer. “So naturally I’d go out there every Sunday night. And of course Harold gave Bobby lessons in tap. Harold was Bobby’s mentor.”

Helen, Harold, and Bobby Hebb were three of the eight children born to William and Ovilla Hebb. Both blind, and both musically inclined, the Hebb parents instilled in their extraordinary family an appreciation for all types of music, from gospel to the Grand Ole Opry. The Hebb parents’ openness served their children well. Bobby, for instance, would grow up into a career that would take him from the Bijou Theater in 1941 to an opening slot on the Beatles’ final tour a quarter-century later. The latter honor resulted from his having just written and recorded what has proven to be one of the most enduring popular standards of all time, “Sunny.” But long before that, Hebb would work the Grand Ole Opry as a teenaged member of Roy Acuff’s Smoky Mountain Boys. Befriended by the Opry’s first great African-American star, DeFord Bailey, Hebb was accomplished on spoons, trumpet, and guitar, and could hold his own on several other instruments. After stints in the navy and in Chicago, he returned to Nashville in the late 1950s and played with Skippy Brooks’ band (which sometimes recorded as Kid King’s Combo) on numerous Excello sessions, including Roscoe Shelton’s first.

Hebb’s appetite for learning was voracious. Larry Taylor remembers that Hebb gave him his personal copy of jazz guitarist Johnny Smith’s *Moonlight in Vermont*. “It says on there, ‘This album belongs to Spoons Hebb.’”

Harold Hebb was Bobby’s mentor, six years his senior and enormously talented, people say. But he got into trouble as a young man and wound up serving time in the Tennessee state penitentiary in the 1950s. While incarcerated, he hooked up with singer Johnny Bragg of the vocal group the Prisonaires. In 1953 the Prisonaires had scored one of Nashville’s unlikeliest hit records with “Just Walkin’ in the Rain,” recorded for the legendary Sun label of Memphis. The song made the Prisonaires a media sensation and they were introduced to governor Frank Clement, for whom they recorded the exuberant, if unsubtle, “What About Frank Clement (A Mighty, Mighty Man).” After various pardons and withering sales broke up the Prisonaires, Johnny Bragg formed a spin-off group called the Marigolds, of which Harold Hebb was a member. The Marigolds provided Excello with one of the label’s most infectious numbers and biggest hits, “Rollin’ Stone,” though it’s unclear whether Hebb was on that track. What *is* clear is that once he got out of prison, Hebb joined his brother Bobby and sister Helen in the nightclubs of Nashville.

“A lot of time people would call Harold and ask Harold to get him an act together, and he would always include a female vocalist. That female vocalist would be me,” says Helen Hebb. “And of course the clubs that we performed in mostly were white.”

One such club was situated on what is now the Vanderbilt Hospital complex, another was the Subway Lounge in Printers Alley, which later became the Captain’s Table. “It was segregated,” says Helen Hebb. “And we had there two booths for the band. Two booths. And when we weren’t playing, if we were on break, we sat in those two booths.”

The Subway manager eventually moved out to the Club Baron on Jefferson. Harold Hebb followed him to the Club Baron, not only as sometime entertainer but also as the club’s floor manager. Having given up music to better raise her children, Helen Hebb took a second job waiting tables at the Baron; she was already working one full-time job at the V.A. Hospital. Bobby, by then, was living in New York.

On a cold Sunday morning in November 1963, two days after John F. Kennedy was assassinated, Harold Hebb was knifed to death outside the Club Baron, as a confrontation that had begun inside suddenly escalated. He was attacked by two men, one of whom he killed with a shotgun even as he was dying himself. Hebb had gotten the shotgun from a club bouncer, who apparently had brought it outside meaning only to scare away the two assailants. But Hebb grabbed it, and one barrel went off into the air. Fleeing, one of the attackers tried to get into his car, Helen Hebb says. “When he saw Harold coming—he just said, ‘OK man.’ So Harold said, ‘Goddamn it no, it’s too late now.’” Harold Hebb shot the man dead, then died of his own wounds hours later.

For the Hebb family, Harold's death was a horrible, inconceivable tragedy—"the worst thing that ever happened." For the community of singers and musicians who were his friends, his senseless death must also have been one more sign that the world they loved was going badly awry. For as early as the mid-1950s, changes were under way citywide that would shorten the days when Nashville jumped.

The first blow came out of left field. In 1952, the Capitol Hill Redevelopment Project, a prototype federally funded urban renewal program, was given the green light to proceed with slum clearance. The primary target was to be the seedy, disease-infested red-light district clinging to Capitol Hill on the north and west sides. Other than the "427 families containing two or more persons and 279 single residents" about to be moved off the hill, many of them into newly constructed projects, few citizens, black or white, saw much reason to grieve for the doomed neighborhood.

But over near the eastern perimeter of the redevelopment district, just within its borders, was the block of Fourth Avenue North that extended from Cedar to Gay. The Bijou Theater, the New Era, the trolley shelter, the cab companies—all would be razed by 1955. Again, not everyone objected. Black and white alike, many righteous folk viewed the block as "iniquity row," as Ted Jarrett puts it. But to others the motives for clearing the district couldn't have appeared more transparent.

For Soo Bridgeforth, the dislocation was devastating. "I did cry," he says. "Cried, cried, oh, oh, cried!" Forced to give up two buildings, both of which he had recently remodeled, he moved the New Era to 12th and Charlotte but says he lost money in the process.

"When you move, well, it's just like startin' all over again," he adds. "Took a good long while to get business built up. And then 12th and Charlotte, at the time, was a bad location...but we finally made a pretty good location out of it."

The next blow came in 1963. When the new Metro charter went into effect, the entire politics of Nashville changed, and the nightlife changed with it. Beverly Briley's reform-minded administration took command of the powerful new city-county alignment, and one of its first priorities was to eliminate the underground enterprise for so long tolerated in higher places. Any number of music venues had been financed by illegal gambling, and when the games went, so went much of the music. Helen Hebb's exit from the nightclub business followed a visit to the Club Baron by a party of Metro reformers. "I was doing real good, and then they came in there with the axes. I said I'm through. I'm through. No more.... The city just tore up the place."

Then in 1968, the interstate came through and the New Era had to move yet again. Though Bridgeforth set up only half a block away, at 1114 Charlotte, he still lost so much business initially that the club had to shut down for a week or two. "So it was a scuffle again," he says.

Over on Jefferson Street, the interstate put an end to the Del Morocco as well. "Where we get off on Jefferson street there—where the exit gets off runs right through the front door," says Acklen Jr.

For the recording artists, a different set of circumstances militated against their continued success after the peak years of the mid-1950s. The postwar indie world tended to be more creative than lucrative. A smash hit like "Near You" was not the norm but the freakish exception. The singers rarely saw many royalties, yet most of the indie record men were scuffling their own way too. "We had a wonderful time in the record business, but at that time there was no money in it," says Alan Bubis. He and William Beasley eventually found their niche with Hit Records, a label that specialized in low-budget copycat recordings of the current smashes.

Ernie Young was pretty good about royalties, but he cared little about spending money on artist development or promotion. He was a record dealer. He did a good business at Ernie's Record Mart and an even better one over the airwaves, courtesy of John R's popularity and sales prowess. But because he did so well outside normal distribution channels, Young didn't have to care so much what happened to his acts on the road.

As for Ted Jarrett, he cared about artist development, but only so far as that artist could deliver the emotion that Jarrett had written into his own songs. “You weren’t listening for singers, you were listening for troubles,” he says. When Gene Allison proved how supremely he could voice those emotions and troubles, Jarrett sold his stock in the Bubis’ companies in exchange for Allison’s contract. He then put together a package show with Allison, Earl Gaines, and Christine Kittrell, and hired Jimmy Beck’s orchestra, with new guitarist Johnny Jones, to back them up on the road. The tour did well at first, but the results were ultimately disastrous.

“I didn’t realize the fact that artists get cold,” Jarrett says. “And they all started freezing. And I was left out there...and then it just kept going down, and I just kept partying, you know. Then finally we were down on our butts...out there stranded in Fort Worth, and my mother had to send me money to eat off of.”

While Jarrett’s enterprise was dying on the road, Nashville’s identity as the capital of country music was coming into focus. The P.R.-savvy Country Music Association was formed in 1958, the same year that Allison was telling the world they could make it if they tried. On the recording end, the major labels had come to understand that Music City could make them easy money if left to its own devices. Country was booming in Nashville, but it was, says Larry Taylor, who worked both sides of the street, strictly a “cabin industry.”

“A record with no arrangement, four or five guys playing it out of their head, sold for the same amount of money as a big record that cost a ton of money,” he says. “So it was attractive to the record companies.”

But R&B could have been just as attractive, and make no mistake, many in Nashville tried to establish the town as a black music recording center in those crucial early years. Murray Nash, a Nashville industry pioneer during his years with Acuff-Rose, is remembered by both Christine Kittrell and Helen Hebb as one who supported their work. At Mercury in the early 1960s, Shelby Singleton brought such major stars as Ruth Brown and Clyde McPhatter here to record. Tree Publishing executive Buddy Killen’s involvement with Joe Tex was critical to Tex’s mid-’60s rise to stardom, while Fred Foster’s sponsorship of Sound Stage 7 gave Roscoe Shelton and others a supportive home and some of their biggest records. In other words, the 1960s was a rich decade for Nashville blues and soul, a time when still active artists like Marion James, Jimmy Church, and Clifford Curry could be heard on Nashville R&B labels. And with the creation of *Night Train* and *The!!!Beat*, Music City was on the very stomping edge of R&B television, leaving behind hours and hours of outrageous footage for which video hounds lust in vain.

But in Nashville as elsewhere, the 1960s was also a divisive decade, and in the end societal changes took their toll in Music City. Says Larry Taylor, “It was when...black people started to get militant about things that white people turned their backs on them. And I saw it in playing, whereas at one time it was very fashionable to copy black musicians, then over a period of a few years it became unfashionable to copy them.... And there I was, what the hell was I gonna do? So I figured it was time for me to get out.”

Other R&B players and singers joined him in the exodus, and it wasn’t long before people forgot that Etta James ever rocked any house that was anywhere near Music Row. Three decades after the interstate plowed through the Del Morocco, people still wonder—every day—why Nashville has so little R&B.

To those who do remember Fourth and Cedar and the low tone of Louis Brooks’ horn, the years have been more or less good. Roscoe Shelton gave up music in the 1970s and went to work at Meharry. Earl Gaines, who for years drove a truck as his day job, drives one to this day. The two of them, along with Clifford Curry, have lately been recording with producer-guitarist Fred James (who compiled the *Across the Tracks* CD), while booking out as the Excello Legends and thrilling a whole new generation of Nashvillians.

After raising her family, Helen Hebb went back to school and earned a journalism degree. She plans to write stories about her childhood in Rocktown, a section of Nashville named for a quarry that used to be sunk in its midst. Christine Kittrell lives in Columbus, Ohio, her spirit strong and her humor inexhaustible, even after 12 back surgeries. “Guitar Larry” Taylor has made a good living in the music merchandising field, and he still plays in a little jazz combo around town. He only regrets that after all these years, friends like Skippy Brooks aren’t around to see their music finally getting its due. In the 1960s, Brooks got what Taylor calls “the gold watch treatment” from the Elks Club. “They didn’t give him a gold watch,” he says, “they gave him his piano.”

To those who observed it all, the memories are equally cherished.

“I was telling my daughter,” says Teddy Acklen Jr., “one of the things...that she’ll probably miss—that her mother and I saw—was the fact we saw a lot of the great entertainers up personal. Just like I’m sitting here talking to you. Where now if you go see entertainers, 35,000 people are in the stadium with you. But we saw them one-on-one, partied with them, went home with them, ate breakfast with them in front of the Del Morocco, whatever was open that night, and walked around. Those were good days. I enjoyed them, I really did.”

Soo Bridgeforth enjoyed them too. “I was a baseball fanatic,” he says, talking about his 89 eventful years. “And I *loved* funky music.”

As for Ted Jarrett? Well, don’t cry for Ted, he’s doing all right anymore. “BMW renewed my contract for the commercial in Germany,” he says. “It pays well. It pays well *in front!*”