

Double Bayou Dance Hall: A Texas Landmark

Owned by blues musician Pete Mayes, the old Double Bayou juke joint embodies a legacy of rich blues music. Located in the tiny town of Double Bayou with a mere population of 400 in 1990 and a predominantly African American community, in west central Chambers County,¹ the dance hall has featured legendary blues artists the likes of T-Bone Walker and Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown. The old dance hall is a well-preserved relic in the annals of Texas blues history. So too is Pete Mayes an exceptional Texas artist, product of this singular place.

The Double Bayou Dance Hall’s origins extend back into the late 1920’s and early 1930’s when Juneteenth celebrants would disembark in Double Bayou from Galveston.² According to Pete Mayes, Double Bayou was “the only place to go” during Juneteenth for surrounding communities to gather.³ Juneteenth began in Galveston after Union General Gordon Granger read the Emancipation Proclamation on June 19, 1865, (two years after President Lincoln issued it), thus freeing 250,000 slaves in Texas. The first Juneteenth festivities promoted African Americans’ political rights and taught freed African Americans about voting.⁴ Since then, Juneteenth has become a worldwide event celebrating freedom and respect for all cultures.

In 1941, a storm tore down the original dance hall. Subsequently, Mayes’ uncle, Manuel Rivers and his wife Ella Rivers, acquired it and reopened the dance hall just right the down road from the original building.⁵ The actual dance hall’s construction materials are older than 60 years (the age of the dance hall) because some of the same lumber that was in the original building when it blew down went toward the construction of the existing one.⁶

In the beginning, today’s dance hall was barely even a structure; it was a just a platform. To simulate where the walls would have been, chicken wire was placed around the platform. Manuel Rivers held a few dances out there and then decided he would close it in.⁷ A thin sheet of painted

tin would later be replaced by a low wooden ceiling,⁸ causing many tall gentlemen to take off their hats and bow down.

For much of its history, the Double Bayou Dance Hall has long served a black clientele. However, the dance hall caters to all people.⁹ In its heyday, the Double Bayou Dance Hall bordered on the outer edge of a network of Black music venues known as the Chitlin Circuit. Before desegregation and thereafter, few White clubs permitted Blacks to perform; consequently, Blacks established their own nightclubs. Because of the dance hall's location and size, it was considered to be right outside the circuit. Nevertheless, big names like Big Joe Turner managed to play there for its unique reputation.

The Chitlin Circuit was a product of segregation and migration. The spread of the music was a consequence of the spread of its people, and blues artists traveled extensively for their fans. With the advent of World War I and increased demand for products in the North, Black Americans, eager to find better living conditions, embarked on an exodus that would take them to the promise land. In 1917, 10 million Blacks lived in the United States; of those people, eighty percent lived in the South.¹⁰ Between the 1930's and 1970's, approximately 5 million Blacks moved out of the South. Many took the "blues highway" from the Mississippi Delta to Chicago, the Mecca for blues men and other migrants.¹¹ For the most part, a lot of the Chitlin Circuit clubs have long since closed their doors. The buildings have been torn down, burned down or since redeveloped. Although, Pete Mayes points out that the Chitlin Circuit is somewhat still in effect. In this aspect, the longevity of Double Bayou Dance Hall is commendable. Despite its remote location and obvious wear and tear, it has preserved itself quite well ensuring the enjoyment of the blues for future generations.

The sleepy town of Double Bayou has a unique history as well. Across the dance hall stands an old mom and pop grocery store where one of Mayes' uncles bought him his first guitar,¹² a five-dollar Gene Autry model.¹³ The small store is one of the few signs of life in Double Bayou. In 1820, a small pirate ship presumably escaped a storm igniting stories of buried treasure among settlers.¹⁴ Carol Rust from the Houston Chronicle wrote about the history of Double Bayou: “[D]uring the Civil War, a Union blockade cut off supplies to Galveston, and ship would fire occasional cannonballs at the island. Many Confederate deserters there turned to crime, and Galvestonians flocked to Double Bayou to escape the misery.”¹⁵ Galvestonians also found refuge in Double Bayou during an 1877 small pox epidemic. In addition, paramilitary Ku Klux Klan survival training was conducted there in the early 1980's until a judge ordered a halt.¹⁶

Double Bayou wasn't only alluring for parties or paramilitaries; it was also a site for commerce. Down the road from the dance hall is Jackson Ranch. John Jackson settled in Double Bayou in 1833 and later married fourteen-year-old Sarah Cade White, daughter of the famed rancher James Taylor White. When Jackson died, he owned 26,000 acres and 6,000 head of cattle. In 1925 oil was discovered.¹⁷ Up until 1935, Double Bayou was a commercial link to and from Galveston.¹⁸ Near Double Bayou, the Trinity River was one of the best sources of trade for Galveston.¹⁹ Traveling on Double Bayou and Trinity Bay, boats remained the locale's primary means of communication with the outside world well into the twentieth century.²⁰ Electricity made it to Double Bayou in the mid-1940s's; the dance hall was still lit by lantern for a while thereafter.²¹

It was in this modest dance hall that Pete Mayes was first introduced to the rhythmic and charismatic blues. As a young boy, his desire to play music challenged him to become a resourceful child: “[W]hen I was a little boy, I'd tie a string to the [door] knob and pluck the

string. I didn't have a guitar."²² Mayes commented that his family paid little attention to his musical interests, but they also never tried to stop him, which is something he thanks his grandmother and grandfather to this day. As he got older, he owned an acoustic and later an electric guitar, which "made plenty noise," but wasn't enough for his grandparents to interrupt him a single time. The noise making definitely paid off, even though it was perceived by some in his family as "devil's music." Mayes is a self-taught musician and throughout the span of his life, he has had only 12 formal lessons and one semester of guitar at San Jacinto Junior College, which he modestly admits he did not need to study.²³

Among his professional influences he cites superstar of the blues B.B. King, leading artist Lowell Fulson, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown and the great T-Bone Walker. Aaron Walker, a.k.a. T-Bone Walker, was an exceptional blues innovator and contributed significantly to the modern blues. In the early 1950's, he was one of the first musicians to adopt the electric guitar.²⁴ Pete Mayes played with "Gatemouth" Brown for several years, participated in shows with B.B. King and performed with T-Bone Walker for about 50 to 60 gigs. He says that playing with his musical influences was almost like a dream come true. He still remembers the first time he played on stage with T-Bone Walker, at the Double Bayou Dance Hall, of course. He was barely 16 years old. Frightened to ask him for permission to sit in, an older cousin asked T-Bone. T-Bone called him up to do one song and Mayes ended up staying on stage for 30 minutes.²⁵

In 1960 he left Double Bayou and moved to Houston. The following year he was drafted into the army, and when he was discharged he formed the Texas Houserockers,²⁶ still in existence today. While he was in the army, he won a couple of talent competitions and performed in army shows. He really didn't carry out regular service and he liked that a whole lot.²⁷

From Mayes' humble beginnings in Double Bayou and his first presentation in Double Bayou Dance Hall, his musical career took him all over the United States, to South America and Europe. When he was 22, he spent 3 months in and around Bogotá, Colombia. At that time, he was touring with his band and "Gatemouth" Brown. He also stated that Europeans' appreciation for older people is much greater in Europe than in the United States; he was treated and accepted better than anywhere else.²⁸

Mayes himself traveled a "lighter" version of the Chitlin Circuit, but not with his own band. He traveled with blues artist Junior Parker, whom he worked with for 5 years. Even though he played the circuit, he played in White clubs as early as the late 1950's. In Mayes' words "it was a rare thing." In some cases, the performers weren't even allowed to put a foot on the dance floor, which they carefully avoided when walking across the room to get paid. They came in through the back door and left the same way. The racism that permeated the land at the time left many with a down-hearted melancholy: "[T]here are so many things that happen in an artist's life that makes him have a feeling that only he know about."²⁹

Mayes' discography spans several years and several albums, some of which are his work alone and others just singles on compilation records. His most recent album, For Pete's Sake, was released in 1998. Four tracks were recorded in Houston and the rest in Austin. Mayes was very proud of the album and said "it gave him good feelings."³⁰ He also participated in a short-length documentary called Living Texas Blues: Battle of the Guitars. It was directed by Alan Govenar and produced by the Dallas Museum of Art.³¹

Mayes' musical career hasn't been without any bumps in the road. He, along with 15 other musicians, sued Roy C. Ames, a music producer, and Collectibles Records of Ardmore. Ames licensed Collectibles to sell the musicians recordings and use their names and photographs.

Under federal law, the lawsuit sought damages for unauthorized use of musician's names and photographs under state law.³² The products in question are now off the market thanks to a class action judgment³³ that awarded Pete Mayes, Joe Hughes and other blues musicians monetary compensation.³⁴

Mayes doesn't play as much as he used to due to complications from diabetes. As far as his musical future in recording is concerned, he says: "[I]f I can stay a little bit healthy, and if someone has a little more interest in me, then it's more than likely." His fans will anxiously wait for that promise.

Today, Mayes lives with Shirley, whom he recently wed last March on his birthday, and his stepson. The Mayes couple dearly love each other and Mayes says, "[I] wouldn't know what to do if I didn't have her." Even through the support of a loving family, Mayes has had rough times. Earlier this year, their home caught fire from a nearby exploding car. Mayes' limited to a wheelchair, was in the shower at the time; his wife helped him out. For some 30 terrifying minutes the fire raged until the fire truck arrived. And the year before last, he went through open-heart surgery.³⁵

His condition debilitates him, yet he still finds time and energy to make yearly trips to the Double Bayou Dance Hall, which was willed to Manuel Rivers' most "musical nephew" (Pete) in the 1980's. He visits once during the Christmas Holidays in a grand event that makes him "feel real good" upon returning. He says that in the dance hall he feels better than if he were playing somewhere else.³⁶

Since 1995, Jennifer Chavez has managed the dance hall. She began managing with blues man husband Sammy Chavez, now passed away. He had a band called the Blues Hoods and passed the torch down to their son who now has a band of his own called Underground Blues;

they play at the dance hall every Saturday night. The dance hall is open from Wednesday to Sunday. The weekends generally host live bands and the rest of the week is more laid back. As far as the dance hall's attending public is concerned, many are regulars, but Chavez isn't surprised to see new faces. Chavez recognizes the dance hall as a historical marker and believes that some formal recognition is due. She calls the dance hall her "most favorite spot" and affirms that nobody wants to see it go down.³⁷

Certainly, the Double Bayou Dance Hall has proved itself worthy. E! Entertainment Online ranks it as 3rd in America's best blues bars. First place goes to Antone's in Austin and second to Blind Willie's in Atlanta.³⁸ But regardless of any list, the dance hall takes first place in the heart of anyone who knows it.

From a place that Semmes Jackson called: "[N]o name other than "across the bayou" [which] was used to designate the colored community,"³⁹ flourished a little, bitty bar and a great, huge star. Mayes admits that his main reason for keeping the dance hall open is because that's where he got started and had it not been for the dance hall, we would have probably never heard of him.⁴⁰

Places like the Double Bayou Dance Hall are centers of history fulfilling a prophecy of entertainment and tradition. The blues, a musical genre full of troublesome emotions, has inspired a whole new generation of yearning artists. Pete Mayes' advice to them is to look up at their elder counterparts and be assured that if: "[I]'m here or not here, you can hear my soul saying Love You, Madly."⁴¹

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- ¹ Robert Wooster, "Double Bayou, Texas," The Handbook of Texas Online, n.d. , <<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/DD/hrd36.html>> (15 October 2001).
- ² Steve Sucher, telephone interview by author, 26 January, 2002.
- ³ Pete Mayes, interview by author, 1 February 2002.
- ⁴ Teresa Palomo Acosta, "Juneteenth," The Handbook of Texas Online, n.d. , <<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/JJ/1kj1.html>> (28 January 2002).
- ⁵ Carol Rust, "Backwater Blues," Houston Chronicle, 11 June 1995, sec. Texas Magazine, 2 star edition.
- ⁶ Pete Mayes, interview by author, 1 February 2002.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Beth Gallaspy, The Beaumont Enterprise, 16 May 1999, sec. E.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Charles E. Cobb, "Blues Highway," National Geographic 195, no. 5 (1999) : 23.
- ¹¹ Ibid. , 64.
- ¹² Carol Rust, "Backwater Blues," Houston Chronicle, 11 June 1995, sec. Texas Magazine, 2 star edition.
- ¹³ "Texas: Pete Mayes," n.d. , <<http://www.petemayes.com/>> (20 October 2001).
- ¹⁴ Carol Rust, "Backwater Blues," Houston Chronicle, 11 June 1995, sec. Texas Magazine, 2 star edition.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Steve Sucher, telephone interview by author, 26 January, 2002.
- ¹⁹ Keith Guthrie, Texas Forgotten Ports: Volume II (Austin: Eakin Press, 1993), 220.
- ²⁰ Robert Wooster, "Double Bayou, Texas," The Handbook of Texas Online, n.d. , <<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/DD/hrd36.html>> (15 October 2001).
- ²¹ Carol Rust, "Backwater Blues," Houston Chronicle, 11 June 1995, sec. Texas Magazine, 2 star edition.
- ²² Pete Mayes, interview by author, 1 February 2002.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Gerard Herzhaft, Encyclopedia of the Blues, trans. Brigitte Debord (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1992), 356.

²⁵ Pete Mayes, interview by author, 1 February 2002.

²⁶ Rick Mitchell, "Pete Mayes Celebrates Major Label Release," Houston Chronicle, 13 August 1998, sec. Preview, 2 star edition.

²⁷ Pete Mayes, interview by author, 1 February 2002.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Battle of the Guitars," Living Texas Blues, prod. Dallas Museum of Art, 28 minutes, Dallas Museum of Art, 1987, videocassette.

³² Amelia Feathers, "soul patrol: Court Case," 11 October 2000, <<http://www.soul-patrol.com/maillist/October.2000/msg00566.html>> (28 January 2002).

³³ Roger Wood, "A Consummate Gentlemen," Houston Press, 17 September 1998.

³⁴ Amelia Feathers, "soul patrol: Court Case," 11 October 2000, <<http://www.soul-patrol.com/maillist/October.2000/msg00566.html>> (28 January 2002).

³⁵ ²⁷ Pete Mayes, interview by author, 1 February 2002.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Jennifer Chavez, interview by author, 26 January 2002.

³⁸ "Top Ten List for the Best Blues Bars in America," Texas Blues, August 2001, 18.

³⁹ Ralph Semmes Jackson, Home on the Double Bayou: Memories of an East Texas Ranch (Austin: University of Texas, 1961), 112.

⁴⁰ Pete Mayes, interview by author, 1 February 2002.

⁴¹ Ibid.

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