

Silver & Blues



by JOE NICK PATOSKI

photographs by DARREN CARROLL



■ *In a timeless nightclub, Houston's music legacy plays on*



In broad daylight, the Silver Slipper is hardly a looker. The compact building $\frac{1}{4}$ miles north-east of downtown Houston is about as long and wide as an eight-lane bowling alley—“indis-tinct Minimal Traditional,” according to The Handbook of Texas. Three days a week, it’s a bar, short-order eatery, and neighborhood hangout.

Saturday nights, however, the Silver Slipper transforms into something else.

A portable sign with metallic letters lights up to advertise: “OPEN SAT LIVE,” and a sodium-vapor street lamp lights the way to the front door. Once inside, adjust your eyes to the warm red interior lighting and try to find an empty chair, because the joint is usually packed. A mostly African American crowd is decked out for the night in fancy hats, tuxedos, jackets, loose slacks, tight dresses, and coordinated outfits. There are cowboy hats, gimme caps, boots, jeans, and pantsuits too, and a scattering of music fans of all colors joining the locals.

Curley Cormier, the club’s balding, nattily attired proprietor, leads the house band through familiar soul, blues, and jazz instrumentals as the checkerboard dance floor fills up, and the joint begins to jump. “Welcome to the Silver Slipper,” Cormier says. “We’re here for you, doing what we can do.”

Stick around, and you might witness one of the best live music experiences in Texas. You’ll also get a fleeting glimpse of Houston’s rich musical past. Back in the 1950s and ’60s, this part of Houston brimmed with musicians,

singers, bands, songwriters, record labels, recording studios, jukebox operators, publishing companies, and booking agents. Today there is little evidence of all that. A state historical marker a half mile from the Slipper, on Collingsworth Street and US 59, recognizes the birthplace of zydeco music in Texas. Another nearby marker cites the Frenchtown neighborhood, settled in 1922 by French-speaking Creoles of African, Spanish, and French descent from Louisiana.

Subsequent waves of Louisiana Creoles settled in Frenchtown in search of jobs on the railroads or around the Ship Channel following the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and during World War II. Much of Frenchtown’s character and flavor has vanished.

And technically, the Silver Slipper isn’t in Frenchtown. It’s one block north of the neighborhood boundary, in Kashmere Gardens. But when there’s an accordion in the band on your first visit, and everyone in the club seems to have a connection back to Louisiana, it’s close enough.

“EVERYBODY IS SOMEBODY HERE,” observes Dorothy Cormier, who tends the bar, serves as short-order cook during the day, shakes hands, gives hugs to welcome guests on Saturdays, and lords over the Slipper along with

Places like this don’t exist anymore, but you start to believe it will last forever.



Mike Stone plays the keyboard, while Veronica Galentine (pictured on the previous page) works the front door.

Curley, her husband. “Our people, they welcome people,” she says. “We know if a strange person walks in that door. The same people come every Saturday. And they welcome anybody that comes in here.”

The Silver Slipper’s roots extend to 1952, Curley says, when his father opened a hamburger stand called Alfred’s Place at this location. Soon enough, Alfred Cormier’s friends from back in Bayou Teche in Louisiana, where they emigrated from, badgered him to bring in live music from home—meaning zydeco, the accordion-powered dance sound created by French-speaking Creoles in southwestern Louisiana.



“It’s culture and history and masterful performances and really good people.”

The King of Zydeco Music, Clifton Chenier, played his first live gigs in Houston at the Silver Slipper, working the club for seven years. Clifton’s cousin, Lightnin’ Hopkins, the bluesman cited as the poet laureate of Texas, did an extended Sunday afternoon residency as well.

Curley, 73, was raised to run the place. “We lived across the street,” he says. “The old man believed in everyone working. Sunday mornings, you mopped and cleaned up. I enjoyed it just like he did. He always felt like somebody in the family should run this place, and since I was so close to him, he decided, ‘I’m going to run with this guy. I think he’ll do it and keep it respectable.’ After the old man put it in my blood, I had to run it.”

Curley met Dorothy, his bride of 47

years, at a Sunday zydeco dance at Alfred’s. In 1973, the couple took over the business from Curley’s sister, who had renamed it the Silver Slipper.

Dorothy and Curley made changes. Boudin balls, made from Cajun blood sausage, came off the menu. Curley’s father used to make 300 boudin in one day, Dorothy says. “And they got me into it. When his daddy passed on, I said, ‘No more boudin.’ It was too much.”

Zydeco is no longer featured at the club. While Houston claims more zydeco bands than anywhere in the world today, the modern players who infuse hip-hop into their “la-la” music, as zydeco is sometimes called, don’t much appeal to Curley. He’d rather hear the kind of blues and R&B popular throughout the black South—singers from the 1970s and ’80s like Tyrone Davis and Johnnie Taylor, working a danceable, up-tempo kind of shuffle.

And he’d rather be the one playing.

Curley picked up guitar after he heard John Lee Hooker as a boy and has continued playing while raising a family and holding down day jobs (he’s a “Senior Helping Seniors” for Meals on Wheels). He worked in bands backing up touring stars such as Johnnie Taylor, Etta James, BB King, and Ike and Tina Turner, and as a session guitarist for producer Huey P. Meaux. After surviving a simultaneous heart attack and stroke, Curley had renewed appreciation for the Silver Slipper house gig. “It’s my own spot,” he says. “I don’t have to wait for a phone call. Ain’t nobody gonna fire me from here.”

THE PARTY GETS GOING AROUND 10 P.M. On the small bandstand in the corner to the right of the entrance, Curley subtly cues up recorded music on his laptop. As his band, the Gladiators, settle in, they riff along to the records Curley plays.



Clockwise from top left: bassist Charles Similen, waitress Cherry Woods, drummer Mark Stennis, and singer King Marcus, who paces the dance floor as he performs.



Curley Cormier, 73, owns the Silver Slipper and leads the house band on Saturdays. "It's my own spot," he says.



When “Driving Wheel” by Little Junior Parker comes on the sound system, everyone in the band is so familiar with the song—a 1962 Duke Records hit made in Houston—they are playing along as it reaches its crescendo.

Curley closes the laptop, removes his suit coat (but leaves on his tie and long-sleeve white shirt), straps on his big Gibson hollow-body electric guitar, and goes to work. Sharing the cramped 2-foot riser with Curley are keyboardist Mike Stone and drummer Mark Stennis. The bassist, Charles Semian, sits below them on a folding chair, tucked into a tight space between tables. The red rope lights and the small multicolored disco ball illuminating the room make it difficult to see the musicians. But that’s not the point. It’s all merely part of the show at the Silver Slipper.

Curley calls up King Marcus, a strapping, boyish-faced, middle-aged man in an all-white three-piece suit and matching hat. (He dressed in white, he told a friend, “Because I’m King Marcus!”) Marcus proceeds to sing a string of salacious ballads in a bedroom tenor, pacing the dance floor and sliding between tables to croon directly to the four middle-aged ladies who have been talking back to every line he’s been singing.

“Woke up this morning and laid down and cried. ... Ain’t never comin’ home no more; gonna find somebody else. ... ’Cause while you were slippin’ out, someone else was slippin’ in.”

At midnight, Curley calls up Joe Hill, the featured singer. Hill looks sharp in a snap-brim cap and tinted glasses, his substantial frame draped in a loose, open-collar black shirt with a gold cross dangling around his neck and gray slacks. He cradles the portable mic in his left hand like an old friend and clutches a towel in his right hand to mop the sweat from his brow. He’s been working the Slipper for 23 years. He knows what’s going to happen.

Curley silently cues the musicians as Hill sings, croons, and growls his way through medium and slow-tempo rhythm and blues. The dance floor fills again, with King Marcus and his wife gyrating next to a lanky man in overalls moving with a svelte woman in a hot-pink pantsuit.

The buzz of conversation grows with each song, with sharp laughs and shouts of joy punctuating the ambient noise. Hands wave in the air in time to the music. Veronica Galentine, the door lady, is swaying back and forth to the beats.

Some songs are requisite: “Mr. Sexy Man” by Nellie Tiger Travis, which is

Sharp laughs and shouts of joy punctuate the buzz that grows with each song.

reworked by Joe Hill into “You Sexy Thing;” “Turning Point” by Tyrone Davis; “I’m Mr. Jody (It Ain’t What You Do, It’s How You Use It)” by Marvin Sease. Some may seem like outliers in a blues club, like the country songs “Tennessee Whiskey” by Chris Stapleton and Brooks & Dunn’s “Neon Moon,” or the folk anthem “If I Had a Hammer,” but Hill renders each so soulfully, they’re standards now.

During one ballad while working the tables, Joe Hill hands over the microphone mid-song to an older gentleman in a Western hat sitting down, who sings a few lines before handing off the mic to King Marcus, sitting next to him, who does the same before handing it off to a third gentleman, then back to Joe Hill, who squalls like a revival preacher



Joe Hill has been singing rhythm and blues at the Silver Slipper for 23 years. Left: the house band backs him up.





"Everybody is somebody here," says Dorothy Cormier, who owns the Silver Slipper with her husband Curley.



when he hits a high falsetto or declares, "I don't mind, I don't mind bein' your fool ... I don't mind going down, baby! Come on down!"

After numerous calls for the "kitty, kitty" song, Hill launches into "Scat Cat," a blues ballad with a message about fidelity, working his way to every table while singing to give the ladies an opportunity to meow into the microphone. The audience is very involved.

By the end of the night, Hill will have sent a good number of the crowd into varying states of ecstasy. Not bad for a 75-year-old senior citizen.



ONE OF HOUSTON'S MOST SIGNIFICANT—and infamous—musical landmarks once stood 20 blocks southeast of the Silver Slipper. Founded as a stylish dinner-and-dancing club in 1945, the Bronze Peacock soon became the headquarters of the Duke-Peacock recording empire. Known for a sophisticated, uptown sound defined by tight arrangements and brassy horn sections, it is thought to be the nation's only record label owned by an African American until Berry Gordy of Motown fame came along. Duke-Peacock was also notorious for its business practices, but it developed the careers of influential rhythm and blues artists in the 1950s and '60s like Big Mama Thornton, who had a hit with "Hound Dog" four years before Elvis did; and gospel groups like the Dixie Hummingbirds, whose shouting and showmanship inspired James Brown.

The old Bronze Peacock building was torn down a year and a half ago. Since the 1990s, three of Houston's longest-running blues clubs—the Continental Zydeco Ballroom, Etta's Lounge, and Mr. Gino's—also closed. Newer clubs and other venues in and around Houston continue featuring blues and zydeco, but as far as places with a history, other than the Eldorado Ballroom, which is open for special events only, it's pretty much down to Saturdays at the Slipper.

In other words, places like this shouldn't exist. And yet, you walk in and feel so at home, you start believing it will last forever, especially when the stories roll out and past becomes present.

"This isn't a tourist place; it's not a tourist town," says David Dove, a Silver Slipper regular who is founding director of the Nameless Sound experimental music nonprofit. "Houston is an amazing music town, in all aspects and every way, but that's not its identity. No one sees it that way. Tourists don't come here to listen to music. People don't come to the city thinking of its history very often."

The mix of clientele varies on any given Saturday, in no small part due to Dove, who Dorothy says "integrated the place." On his first visit in 2003, Dorothy was convinced Dove was with the police, but then she learned about Nameless Sound, which presents an experimental and avant-garde

music concert series in Houston. "I host musicians from Europe, from Japan, from all over the U.S.," Dove says. The Silver Slipper is usually on the after-performance itinerary. "You bring a Swedish saxophone player to the Silver Slipper, this is the place this guy has been waiting to go his whole life," Dove says.

On this night, he's with Vietnamese experimental composer Vũ Nhật Tân, whose commissioned piece was performed by the Apollo Chamber Players in Houston earlier that evening. Vũ beamed as he was introduced. "He keeps saying he's never seen anything like it," Dove says.

Later, Dove put the place into context. "It's the total sensory experience," he said. "It's culture and history and art and good vibes and masterful performance and really good people."

Plus, there is always an element of surprise. You never know who's joining Curley and the Gladiators—Miss Shirley, the demonstrative chanteuse who wails paint-peeling renditions of Ray Charles' "Night and Day," the mystery guest trumpet player, or Roger Valentine, a hefty dancer with James Brown moves.

Saturday nights eventually turn into Sunday mornings. After the lights go out at the Slipper, Dorothy and Curley make their way home, and they review how the night went. Curley will inevitably turn to Dorothy and say, "I think people had a really good time to-night." And he'll be right. 🐾

SILVER SLIPPER

at 3717 Crane St. in Houston, hosts live rhythm and blues Sat 10 p.m.-2 a.m. Doors open 8 p.m. \$5 cover. Call 713-673-9004.