



A Legendary Honky Tonk

by Scott Sosebee

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What do you get when you combine a little rag-time piano, soulful twelve-bar southern blues, splash in a driving old-time rock-and-roll beat, and then roll it all into play with country standbys such as the guitar, fiddle, stand-up bass, and pedal steel guitar (actually imported from Hawaii)? Why, what you get is the unique born in Texas sound of “honky-tonk,” a genre that refers as much to the places where you can hear as it is its inimitable sound. A proper honky-tonk has a band skilled in playing such a brand of country music, a variety that Ernest Tubb, Merle Haggard, Dwight Yoakam, but especially the king of honky-tonk music Hank Williams, specialized in. It also serves plenty of cold beer—but little or nothing else—and has a dance floor that dominates the entire room, preferably strewn with saw dust and the scars of decades of the “boot scooting” that went on across its wooden planks. Many places in the United States have such “joints” (as my Grandma Sosebee called them when she often said, “You will not find Jesus in those beer joints so don’t try”), but no state has as many or has made them such a part of their culture as Texas. And East Texas has one of the most essential honky-tonks ever opened in the form of the Reo Palm Isle in Longview, a place whose history reads like that of the history of the royalty of “Texas Music.”

The Palm Isle opened in September 1935. George Culver, A.G. Carter, Tom Cook, and Bill Deane took a huge risk during the Great Depression when they pooled \$20,000 in an endeavor that promised to build “the largest and most elaborate night club in the South.” The result was a building with a dance floor that could accommodate more than a thousand couples, a huge (for that day) twenty-by-thirty stage—built to hold even the largest of the “big bands” of the era—and state of the art lighting and sound technology. Not to be outdone, the parking lot was five acres, which could hold a lot of pick-up trucks.

Bill Deane managed the operation, and he initially booked “Big Band” acts into the club. The list of bands that “played the Palm” reads like a who’s who of the genre, performers such as Glenn Miller, Ozzie Nelson, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and Tommy Dorsey. Despite the Depression, the Palm Isle packed in crowds five nights a week, and became a destination for any band touring Texas and the South. However, even with the success, Bill Deane left the club in 1937, and Hal Cooper, a local Longview club operator, took over running the Reo. Cooper’s tenure didn’t last long as he was drafted in to the army in 1942 and fought in the Pacific. When he left, he rented the Palm to another Longview “clubber,” Mattie Castleberry, who eventually bought the Reo from Cooper in 1943.

Cancer struck Mattie in 1948, and she tried leasing the club to others for a while, but in 1951 had to sell to Sherman Sparks and Glynn Keeling, two men who had owned a small club named the Reo that booked country acts. The two men renamed the Palm Isle the Reo Palm Isle, and its modern incarnation as a country honky tonk began. Hank Williams played the Reo at least twice while he was in between appearances on the Louisiana Hay Ride. Ray Price was a regular headliner, and Jim Reeves played there whenever he returned to his native East Texas. Most prominently, “The King” himself, Elvis Presley, played the Reo Palm in 1957.

It remained a viable and prominent “spot” through the early 2000s. Anybody who was anybody in country music played the Reo Palm Isle. Its original fifteen-hundred square foot dance floor was expanded to more than three thousand feet over the years, and the “Urban Cowboy” craze led it to bring in a mechanical bull, video games, and even a restaurant. However, tastes change, and by 2010 the era of the Reo Palm Isle was over. The business closed and the building began to crumble. However, the memories of the “grandest honky-tonk in East Texas” remain.

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