

# Club Earns Niche In Town Eatonville Once Known As Home Of Club Eaton

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EATONVILLE — In the 1950s and '60s Club Eaton was one of the nightspots that helped boost the popularity of musicians such as James Brown, Fats Domino, B.B. King, Aretha Franklin and Tina Turner.

"During the 1960s, before integration, Club Eaton was booming because it was one of the few places in Central Florida where blacks could sit down, socialize and enjoy alcoholic beverages," said Harry Bing, managing owner of Mr. B's nightclub.

Bing's family bought the old Club Eaton and turned it into Mr. B's. Club Eaton was built in 1952 by Condon Merritt, a black Altamonte Springs entrepreneur. As patriarch for the Winwood community near Altamonte Springs, Merritt, who died in 1973, parlayed a fruit picker's salary and legalized gambling just after [World War II](#) into nightclubs and country stores and a real estate empire in Orange and Seminole counties.

"A nightclub is an escape place," Bing said. When blacks were barred from going to many white establishments, Club Eaton was a place where they could go to enjoy themselves, meet people and show off their dates, he said.

"People would come from miles around to Club Eaton," said Ron Rogers, assistant to the mayor of Eatonville. Anywhere in Central Florida when the town of Eatonville was mentioned, people would know it was the home of Club Eaton, he said.

When James Brown performed at the club, there was standing room only, Rogers added.

Dress codes were always strict at Club Eaton. Men had to wear coats and ties and women had to wear dresses.

"You hardly ever get a fight out of a black guy who's dressed up," said F.M. Otey, a longtime resident who is compiling a history of Eatonville. In addition, he said there were seldom problems in the club because Eatonville had a strict police department.

The popularity of Club Eaton began to wane with the start of desegregation. Eventually the club stopped booking expensive, big-name performers as more patrons started going to integrated nightclubs, said Eugene Holt, who managed the club for the late William "Billy" Bozeman, a former owner.

After the Bings bought the club from Bozemen in 1983 they spent more than \$106,000 to renovate and equip Mr. B's. "We did most of the inside construction, and what we didn't do, we supervised," Bing said.

Bing said the club at 426 Kennedy Blvd. has about 6,500 square feet and a mailing list of more than 1,000. The club caters to a white-collar clientele. "We even have a steady group of white clients because they know we stay open until 4 a.m. and they feel safe because the police department is right across the street," Bing said.

"We sponsor fund-raisers for political candidates, college fraternities and sororities and we hold a Bethune-Cookman College kickoff at the beginning of their football season," he said.

Bing's family also owns the Rainbow Club, another nightclub on the west end of Kennedy Boulevard.