

ORLANDO SENTINEL

http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/1987-08-13/lifestyle/0140080163_1_cotton-club-bernie-lee-eaton

Eatonville Had Own Answers To The Cotton Club

August 13, 1987|By Agnes Torres of The Sentinel Staff

For more than 30 years, two Eatonville clubs have stood at opposite ends of Kennedy Boulevard, providing the community a place to celebrate family milestones and relax after long, hard Florida workdays.

Although they are several decades short of celebrating their centennials -- as Eatonville is doing this weekend -- the Rainbow Club and Mr. B's, formerly the Club Eaton, are firmly rooted in the community. Since the 1950s, townspeople have flocked to both, in search of cold drinks, warm conversation and sizzling music.

The Club Eaton, 426 E. Kennedy Blvd., was built in 1950 by Altamonte Springs resident Condo Merritt, at the time one of the wealthiest black men in Central Florida. A few years later, it was purchased by Billy Bozeman of Orlando. The former musician transformed the club -- an expansive dance hall with two bandstands -- into an entertainment hot spot, booking top national acts such as James Brown, Sam Cooke, B.B. King, Ray Charles, Chuck Willis, the Drifters and the Platters.

"It didn't have the mystique of the Cotton Club, but it was a Class A place," said Bernie Lee, a pianist, bassist and vocalist who performed at the Club Eaton with different groups, including the Bernie Lee Trio and Bernie Lee and the Soul Brothers, from 1957 to 1972.

"Before integration, that was the spot in the area. Entertainers spread the word, and it was known all over the country," Lee said.

Big name entertainers who performed at the Club Eaton so liked its atmosphere that they would take time to mingle with Lee and his band. "I chatted and played with all of them," Lee said. "One of the highlights of my career was when James Brown came down from where his band was and sat in with us."

Another reason the club gained popularity among musicians was that it had rooms upstairs where they could spend the night.

"Let's face it, the big name acts could afford hotels, but at that time black entertainers couldn't stay in white hotels," said Lee. "They stayed at the Club Eaton because they didn't have to get off the bandstand at two in the morning and try to find a halfway decent black motel."

After Bozeman's death in 1984, Hillsborough County educator and commissioner E.L. Bing bought the Club Eaton and changed its name to Mr. B's. With the help of his son Harry, who now manages the club, he rebuilt its interior and repainted its exterior bright blue. Bing's daughter Altrell chose the orchid and plum color scheme of its interior decor.

Mr. B's now is a polished, multi-level club, instead of the barnlike Club Eaton, which had rows of tables and booths against the wall. A disc jockey spins rhythm 'n' blues and jazz oldies on weekdays and dance tracks on weekends. The club caters to young black professionals, but it often doubles as a meeting place of civic organizations.

"I was knocked off my feet," Lee, 56, recalled of his first look at the renovated club. Lee, who now owns Eatonville's Lee's Cafe, Lee's II Family Restaurant and Lee & Son Photo Studio, said he had been confident that the Bings, who had operated clubs in Eatonville since 1947, would do a good job with his old stomping ground. "When we townspeople first heard they were taking it over, it gave us a comfortable feeling."

From 1947 to 1951, E.L. Bing's uncle, E.J. Bing, operated the Green Lantern tavern in a building across the street from the Club Eaton. E.L., a native of Plant City, helped out his uncle on weekends and during holidays from college. After closing the Green Lantern, E.J. Bing operated the Club Continental in Boynton Beach for a year. Then, in 1952, he teamed up with his nephew and opened the Rainbow Club in a building on the opposite end of Kennedy Boulevard from the Club Eaton. It was the quintessential "come as you are" neighborhood bar.

"We named it the Rainbow because a rainbow is something you look forward to. It's the pot of gold at the end of a long day. Back when we first opened that meant a long, hot day in the orange groves for a lot of people," said E.L. Bing, 66, who now lives in Tampa.

In its early days, the club was a cramped 40 feet by 40 feet, with outdoor bathrooms and a jukebox. Located at 500 W. Kennedy Blvd., it has grown to approximately 10,000 square feet, including a package store, lounge and dance club, with music supplied by a disc jockey.

E.L. Bing managed the Rainbow Club in absentia from his home in Tampa until his son Harry moved to Eatonville in 1977 and took over. Since 1985, it has been managed by another of Bing's daughters, Crysta Whittaker.

Harry Bing, 35, has his own memories of the club, which is almost as old as he is.