

Behind the Curtain at the Neighborhood Theater

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Everybody loves a happy ending, and for Charlotte music lovers, news that the Neighborhood Theatre will continue without missing a beat was welcome indeed.

As a musician, music writer and diehard fan, I was as stunned as anybody when the theater's operator, JEM Entertainment, announced in January that the partnership would likely be folding its tents at the end of March.

The theater's funky charm and broad array of top talent over the past 12 years have made it special among folks who take their live music seriously. As it grew, it pumped life into the blossoming North Davidson community — galleries, restaurants, and shops — by attracting people to NoDa who might have never visited otherwise.

An outpouring of public sentiment over the theater's rumored demise, backed up by advance ticket sales and pledges of support, convinced JEM to press on.

"(Shutting down) was a planned business decision, based on a thorough evaluation of our situation," says JEM partner Zach McNabb. "It wasn't like we were in default of anything. But we could clearly see things couldn't continue as they were." Words to that effect were posted on the Neighborhood Web site.



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Then the Facebook "Save the Neighborhood Theatre" page erupted with well over 7,000 members as word spread on the grapevine and in the press. Attendance and interest picked up, and public demand brightened the grim picture.

"We've got a good fresh start," Zach says, sitting on a March calendar that includes Robert Earl Keen, Ani DiFranco, Cross Canadian Ragweed and another All Arts Market event.

Tyler Foster, owner of the theater property since 2007, is glad the hullabaloo's over without a wrenching transition. The theater was never in danger of closing, he says — he'd been looking over promoters who could pick up the flag if the worst happened — but continuity works for him.

"I'm just glad Zach and company will keep trucking along," Tyler says.

So, that's the news! But, there's always a story behind the news, and the Neighborhood's is storied indeed.

Termed an "arts district," NoDa is the closest thing Charlotte's ever seen to a bohemian community — a vibrant urban environment with overtones of consciousness. But it wasn't always that way.

From the 1900s through the 1950s, North Charlotte grew into a thriving textile-mill village beyond the outskirts of town — but when the mills collapsed like dominoes in the late '60s and early '70s, it began a two-decade spiral into degeneration and blight: crime, drugs, dives, streetwalkers, seedy storefronts and empty buildings.

By the time Center of the Earth and other galleries and businesses established a beachhead in the mid- to late 1980s, you could buy a four-room mill house there for under \$20,000. Paul McBroom and his partnerwife, Sharon Pale, early on saw the potential in reviving the neighborhood and established a real estate business, buying, improving and selling houses to attract residents who would help the community outgrow its reputation as an irredeemable slum.

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"Some of the people living there now wouldn't believe what it was like back then," Sharon says.

Among the ruins set the old Astor Theater just off the northeast corner of Davidson and 36th streets — unoccupied for 20 years, grossly dilapidated. Built after WWII to serve the booming mill community, the Astor made a splash with a classy design (main theater, big lobby and balcony) and a village to support it. But when the mills went bust and the community tanked, the theater, then next door to a topless bar, resorted to X-rated films until its slow death in the '70s.

In December 1997, Paul and Sharon struck a deal for the northeast-corner property, which now includes the theater, Boudreaux's restaurant and Wine Up. They tore into renovation as if sweat equity were gold, intent on building a venue aimed at a more upscale-alternative audience with an accent on top-shelf roots music.

Sharon ran the day-to-day operations and bookings while Paul, still involved in his real estate business, took care of the facility (including the sound system) and acted as "quasi-bouncer."

Paul and Sharon didn't shy from the gamble they were taking in the early going. Conventional wisdom said their strategy was lunacy: Shows starting at 8 p.m.? Cover charges steep enough to cover top talent? In a neighborhood where faint hearts dare not tread?

No problem, Paul says. "(During the late '90s), no concert venue sold beer and wine you could take to your seat. People could see a great show and be on the way home by 11 o'clock. Spirit Square had quit booking music, so there was a vacuum we filled.

"We were totally focused on music rather than barroom maling ... it was well-received, and people came, and came back."

Their first show featured newgrass masters Tony Rice and Peter Rowan, and a nearly sold-out crowd showed up. Back then, the only heat was from a wood stove in the lobby, the tiny restrooms downstairs were allocated to the women, and the men were asked to go upstairs and use the bathtubs (yep, bathtubs) in the long-abandoned tenement-style apartments, among the ghosts of post-beatnik winos.

Americana singer/songwriter Michael Reno Harrell opened that show, so it can be rightfully said that he sang the first song in the Neighborhood. His recollection:



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"At that time, the balcony was closed off from the rest of the theater and was used as the green room, which meant you had to walk down the stairs, through the lobby, down the aisle and climb onto the stage via a piano bench ... fun carrying a guitar.

"The stage had about a 5 percent slope toward the audience, so the performers felt as if they might tumble head-first into the front row at any moment. But, all that aside, we had a wonderful show and an enthusiastic audience. And none of us fell off the stage!"

Doc Watson, Newgrass Revival, Taj Mahal, Richard Thompson – the roots-music revival was in full flower, and many great acts crossed the Neighborhood stage over those early years. Randy Ivey, an ardent roots-music supporter from Charlotte, says: "There hadn't been that much Americana and bluegrass around here before that ... (after the theater opened), we were seeing Sam Bush, David Thompson, Will Kimbrough.

"When people would complain there's no good music happening around here, I'd tell them, 'That's because when it is, you're not there!'"

Events also popped up outside the theater. One winter, Paul got a notion to promote a street festival, Mardi Grass, in the middle of February. He asked if my nutty band Lunatic Fringe could cobble together a bluegrass set for a change of pace, and I said, "Sure!" ... Thinking, well, he's the real lunatic here, but he's paying the freight. We worked up a spirited set as the Good Ol' Lunatic Boys and checked our Arctic gear for leaks.

Paul says, "I figured if the worst happened, we could throw frozen turkeys down an icy runway at bowling pins."

But the day turned out with blue skies and 70 degrees—a perfect midwinter day. Dancing in the streets!

During our set, Jorma Kaukonen and Jack Casady of Hot Tuna passed by the street stage en route to their sound check for that night's show at the theater, and they hung around to listen. I had met them briefly in San Francisco during the Jefferson Airplane glory days ... so after our set, they gracefully pretended they remembered me and we shot the breeze awhile about how the universe can sometimes be unpredictable in a good way, and how the gig reminded them of the old days when live music was a community event.

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Enough people had responded to that community spirit that, by the end of their run, Paul and Sharon had upgraded the infrastructure, installed spacious restrooms and knocked a huge hole in the wall to provide a view of the main stage from the spacious lobby, nearly tripling capacity from 350 to 930. "We were working on a shoestring, but good business allowed us to make improvements," Sharon says.

Late in 2003, the couple made "a considered decision" to lease the theater to JEM, a partnership of younger folks with a slightly different vision.

"Our intent was never to stay," Paul says. "We wanted to build up the business to improve the neighborhood, then turn it over as part of our retirement plan."

JEM's plan was to expand beyond roots music. "We wanted to broaden the genre base and do, well ... everything!" says partner Gary Leonhard. And from jam bands to George Clinton to notable indies such as Kings of Leon, Metric and Band of Horses, the Neighborhood has delivered on that mission.

JEM continued to plow money into improvements over time, upgrading the sound system and stage lights, installing a 16-foot fan in the main theater, creating a dance floor and building a small stage in the lobby area to bring in smaller acts on nights when the theater might have otherwise been dark.

"I like to stand at the back of the room as the show ends and watch the people going out – 95 percent of them are smiling," Gary says. "That's my reward – a recurring special moment."

Special moments abound for longtime fans – Laurie Koster, who puts out the Charlotte Events Weekly Newsletter (www.carolinamusicconnection.com), has so many it's hard to pick out even a few. She and her husband, Don, log more shows per year than many do in a lifetime. Standouts for her were Rodney Crowell (2002) and George Clinton (2008).

"Wow! I never stopped dancing and could not believe my ears," Laurie says.

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"But among the brightest moments Don and I have had were the benefits in which we were involved," she says – five consecutive years of the Spread Your Wings breast cancer benefits and the 2005 tsunami benefit. Those shows featured big names such as Alejandro Escobedo and the Gourds along with the cream of area talent – David Childers, Malcolm Holcombe and the Avett Brothers in the early days of their roll, among many others.

"The Neighborhood Theater has always been stellar in helping to organize, promote and bring these shows together," Laurie says.

Zach is quick to plug the folks who keep things running smoothly. "Our staff is our most important asset," he says. In testimony: Christ Central Church, sponsor of NoDa School of the Arts, meets in the theater basement every Sunday. After Saturday night shows, Neighborhood employees work late to make sure churchgoers don't walk into a place that reeks of beer.

And the beat goes on. The theater continues, and the clouds have broken now. But in the feast-and-famine of show biz, particularly in the current economy, it's shrewd to balance risks against benefits, Zach says: "One big show doesn't make your year, and one disaster can cancel out months of profit."

So my fervent hope is that the recent outpouring of support for the theater is not just a flash in the pan, but a wake-up call and consciousness-raising to generate long-term support for performers, promoters and venues across the board in Charlotte.

Live music is a treasure, the most fleeting of the arts, one moment that can change your soul forever. For a working musician, the grail is connecting with the audience members and making them part of the show. For an audience, the grail is connecting with a performance that brings them in.

And that bond extends beyond the big-name acts: Local bands are always stoked over the opportunity to open for big names, and the times *my* bands have opened at the Neighborhood, our reception was always warm and appreciative – even if everybody in the room was chafing for the headliner. That's musical community, sustainable only by the continued involvement of those who'll back up their good wishes at the ticket booth.

- Woody Mitchell

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