

Home

About Pgh Music History

Contact
References

Chronology

- 1755 to 1864
- 1865 to 1929
- 1930 to 1959
- 1960 to 2000
- +2000

Events

Firsts

Hits

Honorees

Links - Music Sites

Links - Pgh Artists

News

- 2013 Pittsburgh Music History Year End Recap
- Biggest stories of 2011 -- Pittsburgh Pop, Rock and Rap
- Hear the Music of Pittsburgh on the Genre Pages via Spotify
- Inaugural Pittsburgh Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame Celebration 01/23/14
- Pittsburgh Music History Celebrates Black History Month 2012
- Scot Tady of Times Online on Pittsburgh Music History
- Scott Mervis on Pittsburgh Music History
- Thanks to Readers of Pittsburgh Music History
- Thanks to the Internet, Pittsburgh's music history plays on
- The Beat: Andrew Druckenbrod and Scott Mervis Video on Pittsburgh Music History
- Vote for the 2015 Pittsburgh Rock 'N Roll Legends Nominees

Pittsburgh Music

Pittsburgh Music Festivals

- Calliope and the Smokey City Folk Festival
- Flood City Music Festival
- Pittsburgh Blues Festival
- Pittsburgh Jazz Festival
- Pittsburgh Rock 'N Roll Legends Awards
- Sonny Pugar Memorial Music Smiles Program
- Three Rivers Arts Festival
- Zanafest

Pittsburgh Music Story

- At the Beginning
- Blues
- Classical
- Composer / Arrangers
- Country & Folk
- Doo-Wop & Vocal Groups
- Gospel
- Hip Hop & Electronic
- Instrumentalists
- Jazz
- Managers & Promoters
- Music Venues
 - Bambola Social Club
 - Civic Arena
 - Club Laga
 - Danceland
 - Electric Banana
 - Fat City Lounge
 - Gene's Blues Bar
 - Graffiti Showcase and Graffiti Rock Challenge
 - Heinz Hall
 - Hurricane Club
 - Leona Theater
 - Mancini's Lounge
 - MCG Jazz
 - Moondog's
 - Murry's Speakeasy
 - MUSICIAN'S CLUB OF LOCAL 471
 - Nick's Fat City
 - Pythian Temple-Savoy Ballroom
 - Rock Clubs
 - Savoy Ballroom - Elmore Theater
 - Shadyside
 - Staircase Lounge
 - Stanley Theater - Big Band Era
 - Stanley Theater - Rock Era
 - Stanley Theater Concerts
 - Syria Mosque
 - The Decade
 - Three Rivers Stadium
- Polka
- Pop
- R&B - Funk
- Radio
- Rock
- Teachers & Schools
- Vocalists

Pittsburgh Record Labels

Pittsburgh Songs

- Martin Delany
- Pittsburgh Christmas

Steeler Nation Music

Sitemap

Pittsburgh Music Story > Music Venues >

Savoy Ballroom - Elmore Theater

Home	Venues	Rock	Doo Wop	Radio	Jazz	Pop	Blues	 Become a fan on Facebook
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Hosted Ma Rainey, Ethel Walters, Duke Ellington and more 1923 to 1938

The Savoy Ballroom and its predecessor the Elmore Theater located in Pittsburgh's Hill district was an important entertainment hot spot for African Americans during the 1920s and 1930s. Opened in 1923 the Elmore Theater presented musical and vaudeville reviews featuring early jazz and blues stars such as Ma Rainey, Ethel Walters, Bessie Smith and Jelly Roll Morton. Converted to a large dance hall and renamed the Savoy Ballroom in 1933 it hosted the major swing bands of the era including Duke Ellington, Chick Web, Fletcher Henderson, Earl Hines, Cab Calloway, Fat Waller, Ella Fitzgerald, Andy Kirk, Mary Lou Williams, Lucky Millinder, Don Redman, Noble Sissle, Luis Russel, and Jimmie Lunceford. According to music historian Colter Harper the Savoy Ballroom was an important center for musical and social life in the Hill. Music fans watched their favorite performers. Teen socialized meeting to dance the hottest new swing crazes. Young Pittsburgh musicians learned their craft by watching and sitting in with the big bands. They gained experience and earned an income playing in the pit bands of the Elmore Theatre shows and the dance bands of the Savoy Ballroom.

Elmore Theater

The Elmore Theater was constructed in 1923 at 2312 Center Avenue near the corner of Soho Street in the Hill District. It opened with much fanfare. The Pittsburgh Courier announced the grand opening in bold headlines.

Hill District Show House Opens in a Blaze of Glory

New Elmore Theatre One of the Finest in City

MAMMOTH PRODUCTION COMING

Constructed at a cost of \$150,000 the Elmore, dubbed the "Palace of Pleasure" by the Courier, sought to out rival the other Hill District theaters. It had a seating capacity of 1,000 and was equipped with a \$10,000 pipe organ. Opening the theater on Monday afternoon of September 8, 1923 manager Benjamin Engelberg declared that nothing but "first-rate high-grade attractions" will be offered. First run movies were featured during September. In October of 1923 the live shows began. Louis Deppe and his Seranaders, fresh from a road tour, performed at the Elmore on October 6. The first stage show was the vaudeville comedy act of Bradley and Earl in November of 1923. The formation of the Elmore Stock Company was announced in March of 1924. The 15 member stock company comprised of Okeh recording artist Virginia Liston, comedian H. Gray and a bevy of pretty girls and jazz fellows would produce and present musical reviews at the Elmore. Their first production was titled "Entanglement". At a point early in his career Jelly Roll Morton played in the Elmore's pit band in a production of "Pickings From Dixie". The Elmore also presented shows by national touring artists and theatrical companies. Ma Rainey, "mother of the blues" appeared in June of 1927. Ethel Waters, the "Queen of the Blues" appeared in several productions including her "New Vanities" show in 1926 and the shows "Miss Calico" and "My Chocolate Girl" in 1928. Bessie Smith appeared in a week long run of the show "Jack Gee's Harlem Frolics" in January of 1928. Some of the most popular acts that appeared frequently at the Elmore were the Whitman Sisters and the comedy team of "Butterbeans and Susie". The Elmore booked national acts through its agreement with TOBA, the Theater Owners Booking Association.

The Elmore continued to present live stage shows through 1929. In 1930 Manager Engelberg announced that the stage shows would stop as he was unable to book a sufficient number of stage attractions. The Elmore lost its agreement with TOBA and the touring shows moved to the Hill District's Lando Theater. The Elmore presented only "high class talking pictures" after that point. M. Feitler took over the theater when Benjamin Engelberg moved to California.

Pittsburgh's 1st Savoy Ballroom

By 1933 the opening day glory of the Elmore Theatre had faded. Harry Hendal owner of the Roosevelt Theater purchased and remodeled the Elmore converting into an upscale dance hall. Hendel was a promoter of big band concerts and musical reviews at the Hill District's Roosevelt Theater.

In December of 1933 the Pittsburgh Courier covered the grand opening of the Savoy Ballroom. The Courier reported that the hundreds who attended were in awe with the conversion of the dilapidated old Elmore into a marvelous beautiful modernly equipped first class dance hall. The writer urged his readers "Pittsburgh needs the Savoy. Let's keep it decently clean and inviting". Hendel invested \$15,000 installing a lighted crystal dance ball, softy tinted wall lights, a shiny smooth hardwood dance floor, rich tapestries and bright red velvet curtains. The spacious foyer had fancy furnishings, deep carpet and polished mirrors. Patrons were greeted by uniformed doormen and footmen under the illuminated marquee. The half-shell shaped stage featured the latest in amplification. In 1930s vernacular "it was Swanky". The Pittsburgh Courier exclaimed "All these features make the Savoy ballroom a thing of beauty and a joy forever". The venue that held 1,500 dancers was billed as "the last word in ballrooms". Vern Stern's 11 piece Savoy Orchestra and Louis Brown, the hi-de-ho sensation from Harlem, performed at the first gala dance held on Christmas Eve. The grand opening show was broadcast live on WWSW. The Savoy Orchestra went do a daily live broadcast on WWSW from the ballroom.

The dance hall, named after the world famous Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, along with the Pythian Temple became one of the primary dance venues for Pittsburgh's African Americans. Restrict by Jim Crow era mores African Americans were discouraged from attending dances at Danceland and other white Pittsburgh venues. The Savoy Ballroom was "where the black bands played".

Dances were held weekly on Saturday nights from 7:30 p.m. to 11:45 p.m. There were also midnight dances on Sundays. Patrons paid a 25 cent admission fee to dance to the music of Pittsburgh based acts. Touring national acts performed once or two a month in dance shows that ran from 9:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m. The admission price to a national act ranged from 65 to 99 cents. The Savoy's slogan was "classy entertainment at popular prices".

Most of the patrons of the Savoy Ballroom were teens ranging in age from 16 to 20. They came to the ball room to dance the "Lindy Hop" and other current raging national dance crazes. Young Pittsburgh musicians such as drummers Joe Harris and Harold Lee stood in front of the stage to closely watch their musical heroes like the members of Duke Ellington band. Sometimes they were asked to sit in with the bands for a song or two.

Chester L Washington managed the Savoy for Harry Hendel. In its first full year the Savoy had many bookings including Fletcher Henderson and his Roseland Ballroom Orchestra, Claude Hopkins, Jimmie Lunceford, Noble Sissle, Don Redman and his CBS Recording Orchestra, the Cotton Pickers with the Eldridge Brothers, Earl Hines, Blanche Calloway, and more. In April of 1934 the Savoy Ballroom Orchestra took on the KDKA Gay Paree Recording Orchestra in "War of the Bands". Zack Whyte and his Chocolate Beau Brummels along with Pittsburgher Olive Douglass played the Labor Day dance. Chick Web played the first New Years Eve show at the Savoy in 1934.

The bands continued to play through the 1930's. Pittsburgher Mary Lou Williams returned home to play several dances at the Savoy with Andy Kirk's Clouds of Joy band. Ella Fitzgerald appeared with the Chick Web Orchestra and later her own band. Duke Ellington was the biggest act drawing 1,500 fans at \$1.00 a head. Fats Waller and Chick Web were also big draws. In addition to its dances the Savoy also sponsored local dance contests and hosted events such as proms and society functions.

The glory days of the Savoy Ballroom faded over the next seven years. Management and patrons didn't heed the words of the Courier writer who urged them to keep the ballroom decent and clean. By 1940 the elaborate interior decorations were in tatters and the shaky orchestra platform was falling apart. Harry Henderson put the building up for sale. During its final year in 1940 the national acts to appear at the old Savoy ballroom were Fats Waller and Ella Fitzgerald in September, Cab Calloway and Jimmie Lunceford in November, and Lucky Millinder in December.

Dances were moved to the Pythian Temple ball room located above the New Granada Theater that Harry Hendel had purchased in 1937. Hendel reopened the Pythian Temple ballroom in January of 1941 as the Hill City Auditorium with an appearance by Earl Hines. Hendel renamed his Pythian Temple dance hall to the "New Savoy Ball Room" in January of 1944. The jazz music stopped at the Elmore Theatre building, but the structure still exists on Center Avenue. It is now the home of the Olivet Baptist Church of Pittsburgh.

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Andy Kirk's Clouds of Joy



Pittsburgh Courier Ad for Ma Rainey



Ethel Waters



Butterbean and Susie



Mary Lou Williams with Andy Kirk's Cloud of Joy



Savoy Ballroom

