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Music Hears No Color

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Music Hears No Color

Growing up on the westside of San Antonio off of Rounds Street, my friends and I played basketball at Ojeda Park nearby. Across the creek from the park sat an old, funky blue building. Some nights we would pass by this blue dome-shaped building and hear the roars of a crowd yelling and cheering for their favorite luchador. From time to time this mysterious blue building hosted outdoor wrestling matches on the weekends. You would have never imagined that this building had been a place where racial barriers were broken down. It was a place where local law enforcement and club owners battled it out in the courts of law and in the club. This was a place where famous jazz musicians played through the night and the sounds of jazz music were created by the intermingling of artists who would not normally come together; black, white, or brown- the color of your skin did not matter. All that mattered was the love for jazz music and having a good time. In the 1940s the once mysterious building was then known as the Keyhole Club and would be heard about for generations to come. It was the first integrated club of the south before the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Inside the Keyhole Club, cultures, ideas and music, normally subjected to Jim Crow segregation, came together for as an institution against racism in the city. It was a force with so much momentum that all of the powers of the Commissioner, Chief of Police, Fire Chief and the Vice Squad of San Antonio could not stop integration from dominating this space.

To have a better understanding of how the Keyhole Club came to be, we need to first know who Don Albert Dominique was. Don Albert, as most called him, was born in 1908 in New Orleans, Louisiana, 7th Ward.¹ In the 1910 census record he is listed as mulatto, which was

¹ 1910 United States Federal Census for Georgiana Dominick. *Ancestry.com*, accessed May 8, 2021.

a term used to describe a person with a mix of French and African ancestry. In New Orleans, this was also referred to as being creole. The 7th ward was distinctively made up of a group known as the Creoles of Color, which Albert was a member.² The Creoles of Color, also referred to as Afro Creole were comprised of multi-ethnic, diverse members with deep roots tied to French, Spanish and African backgrounds.³ The members had many different skin tones ranging from dark to very light. When looking at a picture of Don Albert, he can be easily be mistaken for a white male. This unique feature of his may very well has been a factor that allowed him to slip in and out of cultures of both white and African American.

Don Alberts's father was a drinking man who enjoyed going to bars and night clubs. Albert often tagged along with his father and sometimes jumped in and sang with the bands. Somewhere along the way, Albert found a love for the trumpet and began lessons with a gentleman in Mexico by the name of Milford Péron.⁴ The melting pot continues to thicken as Albert gained influences from a broad spectrum of cultures, which included African, Spanish and French. Albert played in small jazz bands in New Orleans for a while until a unique opportunity to start his own band arose. He assembled a band of eight to nine musicians and played their first show in Dallas, Texas in 1926⁵. At that time, if a band was good enough, they would easily get a residency at a night club. Albert and his big band played in many different venues. They played at the Big Willow, which was located on Fredericksburg Rd, Shadowland and then at the

² Wilkinson, Christopher. *Jazz on the Road: Don Albert's Musical Life*. Music of the African Diaspora, 3. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001),1.

³ Wilkinson, Christopher. *Jazz on the Road: Don Albert's Musical Life*. Music of the African Diaspora, 3. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001),11.

⁴ Holmesly, Sterlin. Interview with Don Albert, 1980. University of Texas at San Antonio. Accessed March 31, 2021.

⁵ Wilkinson, Christopher. *Jazz on the Road: Don Albert's Musical Life*. Music of the African Diaspora, 3. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001),26.

Chicken Plantation for eighteen months.⁶ He started to build a connection with San Antonio during this time. Don Albert and his orchestra band traveled and played in places like New York, Kansas City and so on. Albert kept up with all of the traveling arrangements for his band and continued to book gigs from the 1920s to 1940, when he made his way back to San Antonio, taking a job at Kelly Airfield as a civil servant at the humble age of 40. Music was his passion that never stopped, but Kelly Airfield provided him with the security he was only looking for.⁷ While working as a civil servant Albert experienced racism in the work environment. This was something that frustrated him because he had no control of the environment at work and no means of changing it. In a club of his own, he had more control over the environment, where he could embrace all people of color, every shade without discrimination. Everyone would be able to enjoy music without judgment or worry of any trouble as compared to New Orleans.⁸

In November of 1944, Don Albert opened the first Keyhole Club in San Antonio's eastside. The first location of the Keyhole was located off Pine Street and Iowa Street. It was where the old Ritz movie theater was once located.⁹ With the help of family, renovations were on the way. Don Albert's previous experience of being on the road, managing his band and booking shows became very pertinent when opening up the Keyhole Club. The experiences he obtained were essential to his success. The success of the Keyhole Club could not depend on good management alone, but a solid list of artists who would perform. The unique climate of San Antonio played a large role in the success of the Keyhole Club. San Antonio has a diverse

⁶ Holmesly, Sterlin. Interview with Don Albert, 1980. University of Texas at San Antonio. Accessed March 31, 2021.

⁷ Holmesly, Sterlin. Interview with Don Albert, 1980. University of Texas at San Antonio. Accessed March 31, 2021.

⁸ Wilkinson, Christopher. *Jazz on the Road: Don Albert's Musical Life*. Music of the African Diaspora, 3. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001),

⁹ Holmesly, Sterlin. Interview with Don Albert, 1980. University of Texas at San Antonio. Accessed March 31, 2021.

population of people, especially with the city being so close to the Mexico border, it has a large population of ethnic Mexicans, Indians, and Spanish settlers. Galveston, Texas was also a contributing factor. Between 1864 and 1924 Galveston was a gateway for immigrants who flooded into Texas, many of whom made their way to San Antonio. Galveston was known as the Ellis Island of Texas.¹⁰ Another contributing factor is that San Antonio is home to four military installations, housing troops, sailors, airmen and their families. In 1948 President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981 integrating the U.S. armed forces.¹¹ This was the catalyst that allowed the Keyhole Club and other clubs alike to have a largely diverse and loyal patrons.

The first location of the Keyhole Club lasted a few years, from 1944 to 1948. Albert and his wife returned to New Orleans to try their successes there, opening a night club just as they did in San Antonio. The south was not as accepting of black and tan clubs, also known as integrated clubs. The success of the club relied on being able to dip into both ethnic groups, black and white, and gain them as customers. In New Orleans, local law enforcement barred white patrons from entering black clubs.¹² As long as he was unable to allow both black and white customers into the doors, the club could not last. His attempt to replicate the same type of atmosphere in New Orleans had failed. In 1949 an old friend by the name of Wille “Red” Winner met with Albert and made him an offer that he could not refuse. Winner used to book shows with

¹⁰ Jemimah Noonoo, “Waves of Migrants Made Galveston into Texas' Ellis Island,” *Chron* (*Houston Chronicle*, August 5, 2011).

¹¹ “Executive Order 9981: Desegregation of the Armed Forces (1948),” Our Documents - Executive Order 9981: Desegregation of the Armed Forces (1948), accessed April 8, 2021,

¹² Wilkinson, Christopher. *Jazz on the Road: Don Albert's Musical Life*. Music of the African Diaspora, 3. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001),232.

Don Albert while he was on the road.¹³He offered to help finance the construction of the new Club and Albert was soon on his way back to San Antonio to open the newest and final location of the Keyhole Club. This club was located in the opposite area from the previous location on the eastside. The new home of the Keyhole Club was located in the city's westside, on Poplar Street.¹⁴ Don Albert, like before, understood that he could not rely solely on the African community for his club to be successful. He knew that being an integrated club, just as before, was the key to success. The San Antonio area was saturated with black-only clubs and white-only clubs.¹⁵ Opening the Keyhole Club to everyone- black, white, Asian, Mexican, and every other race was the reason behind Don Albert's Keyhole Club's success. Now, whether Don Albert opted for an integrated club on the sole bases of money and success or it his way of standing up against segregation is left open to personal opinion. Based on the type of person Albert was one could say it was both. He was a business man by trade as well cared for all people of color. By 1950, the second location of the Keyhole Club was up and running.

Don Alberts's son Kenneth Dominic, shared his memories what it was like at the Keyhole Club. He described the place as being one of the hottest night clubs in San Antonio of the time.¹⁶Kenneth worked behind the bar and did a little bit of everything around the club. He

¹³ Wilkinson, Christopher. *Jazz on the Road: Don Albert's Musical Life*. Music of the African Diaspora, 3. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 233

¹⁴ Holmesly, Sterlin. Interview with Don Albert, 1980. University of Texas at San Antonio. Accessed March 31, 2021.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ SemperPhonographCo and Colin Handcock , "A Tribute to Kenneth Dominique: Part II (The Keyhole Club and Advice for Younger Musicians).

even states that he helped with some of the construction of the building. He did this all while attending high school.¹⁷

Don Albert openly advertised that the Keyhole Club was an integrated club.¹⁸ The military bases in town had been integrated since 1948 so many of the patrons were military. Though just because the military was integrated does not mean that all barriers were broken down and everyone was getting along, but if you were able to see beyond the color of another person's skin, and you enjoyed great jazz music, then the Keyhole Club may have been a place for you. If you have ever been in or known any military personnel or veteran, one thing about them is that they work hard and play even harder. Going out and socially interacting with the opposite sex is something that many GI's love to partake in. The Keyhole Club was the perfect place for that.

The club only sold beer and setups, no liquor. It was B.Y.O.B. (bring your own bottle) and the setup consisted of a bucket with ice, a few cups, and a few sodas and mixers, if you brought a bottle. At the time there were liquor curfews which started at midnight during the weekday and 1A.M. on the weekends. People in the club would take their bottle off of the table and put it under the table when the curfew hour hit. It is safe to assume that the drinking really did not stop at the curfew hour. The Keyhole Club was one of the first clubs to charge a cover of 75 cents.¹⁹ This meant that Don Albert had to provide an atmosphere that reflected having a cost for an entrance fee, and he did. There were two floor shows a night, along with some orchestra bands and musicians who played. He booked jazz musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie, Louis

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *San Antonio Light* (San Antonio, Texas), June 13, 1950: 25.

¹⁹ SemperPhonographCo and Colin Handcock , "A Tribute to Kenneth Dominique: Part II (The Keyhole Club and Advice for Younger Musicians).

Armstrong, Big Joe Turner, and many others.²⁰ He also provided in-house entertainment, such as Iron Jaw, who could pick up tables and chair with his mouth. There was also Pegleg Bates, who tap danced with his wooden leg, and Scratch and Patch who told jokes and Big Bertha who was known for her blues.²¹ When the rodeo came to San Antonio, he hosted country western nights where they played country music in effort to appeal to the many visitors from the rodeo. It was quite a spectacle on certain nights at the Keyhole Club. Jazz musicians came by the club after playing for white folks downtown, just to enjoy the evening. People like Nat King Cole and Duke Ellington made appearances from time to time as well.

One can only imagine the conversations about music and life that must have been told within the walls of the club. The mixing of cultures and barriers of race being torn down allowed the people and the music to flow effortlessly. It was said that Don Albert sometimes picked up his trumpet, joined the house band and started to play.²² When you look at pictures of Don Albert the first thing that comes to mind is that he is a tall, white male. His creole background is what gave him his complexion. This may have been a deciding factor on how he was able to traverse such a dangerous world between the two races and create a unique space which saw no color. The wide array of an audience that the jazz music was able to penetrate had a lot to do with the Chitlin Circuit.

²⁰ Wilkinson, Christopher. *Jazz on the Road: Don Albert's Musical Life*. Music of the African Diaspora, 3. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 226

²¹ Olsen, Allen. "The Post-World War II 'Chitlin' Circuit' in San Antonio and the Long-Term Effects of Intercultural Congeniality." TXstate.edu. The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2007.

²² Holmesly, Sterlin. Interview with Don Albert, 1980. University of Texas at San Antonio. Accessed March 31, 2021.

The Chitlin Circuit was a network of musicians and entertainers that provided safe and reliable venues for performance. Most of the venues were located in the south. The circuit made it possible for entertainers to share their music across different state lines during the Jim Crow era. This was an underground network that almost worked in secrecy. NPR journalist Tayna Ballard Brown explained as, "The Chitlin' Circuit was African-Americans making something beautiful out of something ugly, whether it's making cuisine out of hog intestines or making world-class entertainment despite being excluded from all of the world-class venues, all of the fancy white clubs and all the first-rate white theaters."²³ Because of the circuit, jazz music was able to spread into area that it may had never could before. As time progressed many musicians may have been able to jump off the circuit and give more mainstream performances with a better shot at making their music more available to the public. Many jazz musicians could attribute their success to the Chitlin Circuit because it provided them the opportunity to travel and have their music heard outside of their hometowns. We can even take this a little outside of music just a bit. The Chitlin Circuit provided musicians with alternative venues to play at and allowed them to earn a somewhat decent wage. However, because they were contained to the circuit, it limited how much they were able to make, unlike their Anglo counterparts who were allowed to play in much bigger venues. When the circuit made its way through San Antonio, it was an opportunity for people of all races to catch performances that one may have never had a chance to see or hear ever again. The circuit was a breeding ground of cross pollination of music and intermingling of artists from different races and backgrounds during a time when in many places of the United States this was not allowed due to segregation.

²³ Tanya Ballard Brown, "The Origin (And Hot Stank) Of The 'Chitlin' Circuit,'" NPR (NPR, February 17, 2014)

The Keyhole Club caught the attention of many, sometimes not in a positive way. Even though San Antonio was progressively moving forward in terms of racism, there were others who were set in their ways and believed that the mingling of races should not happen. They believed that blacks should stick with blacks, whites with whites and so on. The new police and fire commissioner named George M. Roper was not a fan of the intermingling of races, however, he never openly said it.²⁴ It may have put him at risk for re-election when the time came. He found other ways to try and close the club down. In July 1951, an article was posted by the *San Antonio Light* stated that Roper attempted to close the club down due to a roof that was on the verge of collapsing. He had the city's building inspector put a sign stating the venue was closed. Roper had stated that the building and fire inspectors were receiving large volume of complaints over the unsafe conditions of the club.²⁵ The Keyhole club was not the only club he was trying to shut down. The Casa Blanca, Zebra Room, and the Mona Lisa also had their fair share of run-ins with Roper.²⁶ The one thing they all had in common was they were integrated clubs and owned by people of color. His racism may have not been words, but his actions spoke volumes. Roper's harassment among club owners and their patrons was intensifying. Integration was something new and many people are afraid of the unknown. So, what do they do? They try to stop it, or destroy it and get things back to where they feel comfortable in their environment around them once again. It can be seen as a way to emasculate the African American male and Roper trying to exert his dominance over the club owners.

Don Albert and Winner hired attorney Van Henry Archer, who quickly and successfully filed a counter with a charge of conspiracy and was able to obtain an injunction against the

²⁴ Holmesly, Sterlin. Interview with Don Albert, 1980. University of Texas at San Antonio. Accessed March 31, 2021.

²⁵ *San Antonio Light* (San Antonio, Texas), July 8, 1951.

²⁶ *San Antonio Light* (San Antonio, Texas), July 3, 1951.

harassing city officials. Albert and Winner were arguing that they had not been given the due process in court to prove that the club occupant ready.²⁷ This was one of the first small victories against Roper as he would not stop until he could close the club down. Soon after in August of 1951, there was an injunction temporarily restraining city officials from interfering with the Keyhole Club's operations, which was filled with the Fourth Court of Civil Appeals. It was granted in July, by judge P.C. Sanders in favor of Don Albert and Willie Winner. The injunction restrained some people in very high places, including George M. Roper who was the fire and police commissioner, the Police Chief Cliff Ramechissel, Fire Marshall Marvin H. Uecker, Building Inspector Gus A. Schmitt, as well as Vice Division Lt. Robert D. Allen. They could not interfere with the daily operation, close or attempt to close the club.²⁸ You could just imagine how furious these city officials must have been. The courts were siding with an African American male in the night club business over some of the city's top officials. This does provide a deeper perspective into the how the climate was already changing in San Antonio, even amongst city officials. The city's attorney Jack Davis challenged the jurisdiction of the district court and also asked if Sanders erred in restraining the defendants from lawfully exercising the law under city ordinance. Another court date was set for October 3 1951. Roper must have been frustrated. We have a white male in a position of power and law. He is the commissioner of fire and police backed by the Chief of Police, the Fire Department and the courts, will not side in his favor without adequate proof. On August 19 1951 Roper spoke before the Business and Professional Men's post and the American Legion in which he states, "despite the injunction, he would continue to violate technicalities of the law."²⁹ He did not care what the judge had to say.

²⁷ *San Antonio Light* (San Antonio, Texas), July 2, 1951.

²⁸ *(San Antonio Light, (San Antonio, Texas), July 10 1951.*

²⁹ *San Antonio Light, (San Antonio, Texas), July 14 1951.*

He publicly announced that he would still pursue the closure of the club. Well, this did not sit well with Judge Sanders, who responded to Roper's comment by stating, "If Roper violates very many technicalities his liberty is liable to be at stake." Judge Sanders further goes on to say, "There is no technicality about these injunctions. You either go about it right or you go about it wrong. There sure wasn't any technicality about that keyhole case. Roper just didn't have the facts to prove his case."³⁰ That must have felt like a punch in the gut to the commissioner. These action and words by judge Sanders were a direct display of force that no one is above the law, including Roper. However, Roper and the city officials would still continue to harass the Keyhole Club at its patrons.

Eventually the case made its way to the Texas Supreme Court, in front of the honorable Jack Pope, who ruled in favor of Winner and Albert. Roper and his men failed to prove any violations that were in fault of city ordinance.³¹ Roper appealed the judge's decision in hopes of running the club dry of money through legal fees. This was a very similar practice along the border when Anglos contested Spanish land grants given to Mexicans when Texas became part of the United States. If they could not forcefully take the land, then they would bleed them dry through litigation, bankrupting them in legal fees until they could no longer afford the taxes. Mexicans would lose the land and the Anglos would just come and pick up land at the cost of cents on the acre.³² What Roper was doing had a very similar feel. This did not work in his favor. As he appealed to the full Court of Civil Appeals for the fourth district, Chief Justice Murray upheld Pope's judgment and ordered the city to comply. He also ordered that the

³⁰ *San Antonio Light* (San Antonio, Texas), August 15, 1951

³¹ Wilkinson, Christopher. *Jazz on the Road: Don Albert's Musical Life*. Music of the African Diaspora, 3. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001)

³² "The Anglo-American Conquest." *The Anglo-American Conquest* | GEOG 571: Cultural Intelligence. Accessed May 9, 2021.

commissioner, Chief of Police, Fire Marshall, Building Inspector and the Vice Unit pay all costs in this behalf expended and incurred.³³ This was a huge win, not only for the Keyhole club, but a win against racism. During the time of segregation, it was rare for a white judge defend a protect whatever right people of color had let along let a integrated club continue to stay open. This allowed the African American community in San Antonio to breathe a little deeper knowing that changes were on the way. This win did not change the fact that many other states were still dealing with segregation or that San Antonio itself still faced issues of racism, but it was a step in the right direction. After the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawing discrimination based on race, sex, religion, or natural origin. The Chitlin Circuit was no longer needed. Bands and musicians could now play in larger venues just like their white counterparts earning a better pay.³⁴ The end of an era was coming to a close even though there was still a long road ahead for minorities seeking equality. I am sure for a brief while, there at the Keyhole Club, the victory must have felt as if they were on top of the world and that the legal system worked the way it was supposed to.

At the beginning of the 1960 the club was sold and the nightclub hay days slowed down.³⁵ The area which was once filled with cars and patrons outside the club laughing, joking and where music once filled the air of the westside, was now filled with silence. However, the giant leaps that the Keyhole Club made in breaking down racial barriers at a time when there was no acceptance of racial mixing was permitted. It was during a time when if an African American male was caught dancing with a white female, he could have faced jail time, a ticket or worse. In

³³ Wilkinson, Christopher. *Jazz on the Road: Don Albert's Musical Life*. Music of the African Diaspora, 3. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001),242

³⁴ Tanya Ballard Brown, "The Origin (And Hot Stank) Of The 'Chitlin' Circuit,'" NPR (NPR, February 17, 2014)

³⁵ Wilkinson, Christopher. *Jazz on the Road: Don Albert's Musical Life*. Music of the African Diaspora, 3. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001),245.

some southern states it was easy grounds for a lynching. The Keyhole Club stood as a symbol of resistance against racism in the city. The unique make-up of the San Antonio area and culture was different from anywhere else in the south. Our military bases with their diverse population and already integrated forces helped create this space. San Antonio's deep centered roots with Mexican culture helped create a padded area in the westside for the Keyhole Club. But, one of the most defining factors was the judge. A man that believed that no one was above the law and everyone was entitled to due process. Something Commissioner Roper failed to do against the Keyhole club. All of these things coming together like pieces to a puzzle helped reenforce the ideas of the Keyhole Club where the color of your skin did not matter, all that mattered was that you had a love for jazz and you like to have a good time. Music hears no color.

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