South Texas Stories

Episode: The Passion of the Freak

Interviewer: Jeff Dillard

Interviewee: Robert Stoner

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JD: A quick word of warning, today’s episode contains a number of references to elicit drug use that may not be suitable for some listeners. Proceed with caution.

(Music: Jeff Dillard – Blues Ending in E)

BS: Yeah, no, I’ll never be the musical director of the Ritz. I’ll never be in charge of booking there. I’ll never be the one responsible for bringing in that $300,000 a month. Even if I had the ability to do that, I would not want to be that person anyway. But maybe, I still, in my lifetime, even if was just for one night, to be able to bring some of these bands back. And say, Legends of the Ritz, return to the Ritz.

JD: That’s a fantastic idea

BS: And that’s kind of that’s my life’s work at this point, you know?

(Music: The Civilians – Millions of Civilians)

JD: Hello, my name is Jeff Dillard and I am this week’s host of South Texas Stories.

I think we all have moments from our youth that we wish we could relive, if only once. Making the winning play in a big game, going to prom, you party with friends. These things stand out because they’re the foundational events of our lives, the experiences that make us who we are.

Robert Stoner, or Bob Stoner, is a Corpus Christi musician, music promoter, and he’s an advocate for the preservation of the Ritz Theatre, and his mission is two-fold: On the one hand, he loves the Ritz and wants to see it restored to its former glory. But he also wants to share it with Corpus Christi and once you get to know the man, you’ll see just how passionate he is. He loves helping younger musicians and fans by replicating, even if only slightly, the experience of seeing live music at the Ritz, just like he used to do in the late 70s. He’s also a veteran teacher at West Oso Junior High. And before you ask, yes, his last name really is Stoner. More on that later.

I also mentioned that he is a musician. He’s 56 years old, and much like myself, refuses to let age dictate how he’s supposed to behave. I’ve always been a firm believer in the idea that you’re never too old to rock, and if somebody has a problem with that, well, its their loss. Bob would agree with me. But before we get to that, I want to tell you about the Ritz Theatre in downtown Corpus Christi.

(Music: Art Landry – Dreamy Melody)

JD: The Ritz Theatre was built in 1929. The architect, W. Scott Dunne, built theaters for movies and vaudeville all around Texas. Most of the theaters built at the time were meant to accommodate both film and live entertainment. One of Dunne’s more notable works was the Texas Theater in Dallas, famous for its connection with the Kennedy assassination. But all of his theaters are state treasures, and in my opinion, worthy of preservation. Theaters, of course, meant a lot more in 1929 than they do today. You know, they didn’t call it the Great Depression because everything was going so well.[[1]](#footnote-1)

BS: It was designed in the 20s because buildings at that time were being built for luxury, but they were also, but also being built and used as places that people could escape the harshness of everyday life. Before the stock market crashed, the economy was already suffering. And the dust bowl, and the agricultural problems that had developed from the way that farming was incorrectly done, and stuff like that. That place had been built as a place that was a getaway. It was a fantasy world. It was designed for you to go in there, and when that door shut, you left everything behind you.

JD: The Ritz could accommodate 1,300 people, and it was the first theater in the Coastal Bend that showed talking pictures. It continued in this capacity until the early 1970s. By the time Bob Stoner was attending show there in the late-1970s, it was called the Ritz Music Hall and then later, Ritz Productions. But it had been hosting music for quite a while before changing names. According to the Corpus Christi Convention and Visitors Bureau, even Elvis supposedly played there. The official website of the Ritz says this performance from the early 1950s is undocumented, but Elvis aside, the Ritz hosted an amazing variety of performers over the years: Stevie Ray Vaughan, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Joan Jett, Patti Smith, Bo Diddley and Texas legends like Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings.[[2]](#footnote-2) But for Bob Stoner in the 1970s, it was all about the rock. Did you ever see Dazed and Confused? If you don’t remember, it’s a coming-of-age comedy released in the early 1990s that was praised for its portrayal of that portrays late-1970s teen life in middle America. In fact, the movie takes place in Texas. The kids in the film drink and smoke pot, drive around causing trouble while listening to the greatest hits of classic rock. Well that was Bob Stoner’s youth. And while we may not think of Corpus Christi as a hotbed of the counterculture, compared to the small town where he grew up, it was another world.

BS: There was a place here in town called, um, oh shoot man, it was called Flipside Records. It was also called Dirty Dave’s. Dirty Dave’s/Flipside Records was the earliest Corpus Christi record shop, head shop, barber shop. And when I say barber shop, it was a full-fledged barber shop. And at that time, uh, everybody was wearing their hair long. The one’s of us that could wear an afro, wore and afro. Mostly, what they did in there was trims, so that people’s hair continued to grow longer. Shaping, so that you’re afro was on point. And of course, everybody had big ole pork chop sideburns and different types kinds of sideburns. So it was more of a senciliary art, than a haircut. And it was expensive, and you had to wait in line. And it was so different from going to your dad’s barber shop. It was a place that always smelled like incense. There were black light posters and strobe lights going off. While you were waiting to have your named called to get your haircut you could purchase your concert tickets, buy some albums. Pick up a pack of strawberry rolling papers. It was like this new world!

JD: It was like a Walmart for cool kids?

BS: For us, coming from Woodsboro, we had none of that. For us to come to Corpus was a huge deal. It was an outing, it was an adventure. We had to roll up 15 joints before we could get in the car to drive down here. We weren’t drinkers. Part of being a freak included the idea that you were devoting yourself to marijuana. And moving away from the alcohol culture. Alcohol culture was a redneck culture. Alcohol culture included racism, and the confederate flag, and stuff that we were just completely and totally against. And so we moved alcohol out of our lives so that we could focus on marijuana. Marijuana and music.

JD: Weed and Rock n’ Roll!

BS: Weed and rock n’ roll, for sure. So, the way you did it, if you had a little bit of money, we were lower-middle class kids, but we were the cool kids! In our minds. Now, what everyone else was doing, who cares? We would make 2 days out of it, where one day we would take off from school to come down to buy our tickets. And then the next time we would take the whole day off to be down here in time to be ready for the 7:30 show.

JD: In late July, 1977, Bob Stoner, at only 14 years of age, attended his first show at the Ritz. The headliner, Moxy, was a Canadian band who had recently been getting radio airplay in South Texas. The opener was AC/DC, on their first US tour, supporting their new album, Let There Be Rock.

(Music: AC/DC – Let There Be Rock)

BS: So AC/DC was our introduction to the Ritz, and the Ritz had an air about it. Whereas the Coliseum seemed like a municipal facility that was used for many different purposes including Holiday on Ice, Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, and all that stuff. It wasn’t, the Coliseum wasn’t ours. It was ours for the night, when we would go to a concert there. But when we walked into the Ritz, it was like we were home. And in that first show, when we walked in, you just felt the weight of the world left your shoulders. And you started seeing other faces that looked like your face. And other hair that looked like your hair, and other clothes that looked like your clothes. And then, there were people that were so far advanced, so far ahead of you. They looked like they had just walked in from Woodstock. And you’re like, I want that vest, I want that trench coat. And girls were, mini-skirts, leggings, and stockings, and boots and all that. Once we experienced that, the effect, of being in that building, all of us together. There was definitely a hippy culture inside that building that was completely different from the Coliseum. When you exited, when you made your way through the lobby and into the seating area, many times by the time the first band had stopped playing, you could barely see the stage because of the smoke. It was almost like you could cut it with a knife, it was so thick. And it was from the floor to the ceiling. But the atmosphere in there was vibrant, brilliant, colorful, peaceful, loving, accepting. We were, we began to become familiar with people that had lost an arm in Vietnam, people that had lost a leg in Vietnam. People that, had multiple sclerosis or muscular dystrophy, people in wheelchairs. The Ritz was open for them. It was one of the first buildings that was handicapped accessible before ADA laws were ever even passed. I remember many veterans being pushed in there in wheelchairs. They had gotten into rock in the 60s.

JD: Of course, the Ritz was not the only venue in town. The Memorial Coliseum was regularly hosting big name acts, and there were a number of other live music venues around town. I asked Bob to explain the Ritz’s position in the broader Corpus Christi rock scene.

BS: I think it was the home. It was the hearth. It was the hearth. Although there were lots of other things going on around town, there were other little pockets that were awesome, you always returned to the Ritz. That was like a reunion. When there was a concert, you can hear it in my voice, CONCERT. There was a CONCERT coming!

JD: You’re excited about it now

BS: 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 days out, you were building, you were starting to prepare your wardrobe. Thinking about what you were going to wear, which car you were going to drive, who was going to ride with who, what was going to make it just perfect.

JD: For Bob Stoner, it was this excitement for live music that led to his work in the preservation of the Ritz. As the effort to restore the tRitz Theatre has building progressed since 2006, Bob has played perhaps the most crucial role of all, running shows. Starting in the summer of 2016, he has been running monthly shows at the Ritz in conjunction with Corpus Christi’s First Friday Artwalk, and it has exposed countless people to the Ritz’s existence, and the ongoing effort to bring it back to life. But more than just generating good publicity, Bob’s shows at the Ritz have made the theatre live again. It is no longer just an abandoned old dilapidated building, it is a legit theater, even if it is only so for one night a month.

BS: My journey is an attempt to recreate the feelings that permeated that building in the mid-1970s for as long as I can.

JD: This is about a lot more than just historical preservation for Bob. His mission is different from that of the people spearheading the Ritz’s preservation. The group leading the way, Positive Action Towards Cultural Heritage, or PATCH, is primarily interested in the Ritz’s history as a movie and vaudeville theatre, in other words, its older history. His experience at the Ritz in the 1970s was somewhat, let’s say, marginal in the history of this city. I mean, hosting AC/DC, and Rush, and UFO back in the 70s is pretty cool, but it is unlikely to warrant a State Historical Marker. But for Bob, it meant the world. The shows that Bob attended there were the formative events of his youth. When I compared him to the kids in Dazed and Confused, it wasn’t much of a stretch, it was the greatest time of his life. And I can’t blame him for working so hard to keep it alive. However, in the course of our interview, I couldn’t help but bring a little bit of reality to bear.

JD: Do you think, in a town like Corpus Christi, where we have an issue in that we don’t have a lot of deep pocketed philanthropists around here. The effort to preserve the Ritz does not get the attention that the Galvan Ballroom does. Because, by comparison, the Galvan Ballroom represents a very significant part of the Latino history of this city, which is obviously huge.

BS: Cultural heritage

JD: Whereas, what you are trying to save, and obviously what has a deep connection for me, is the legacy of the rockers, the metalheads, the stoners, the freaks, whatevers of the 70s and 80s.

BS: Yeah, there’s no money in that.

JD: Exactly what I was going for.

BS: There’s no money in that. That’s not a deal you want to pitch Kevin on Shark Tank. It not going to go over very well.

JD: I was trying to come up with an appropriate sort of metaphor to describe Bob’s task, and I couldn’t help but think of Sisyphus, rolling a rock up a hill only to see it roll back down the hill at the end of the day. You know, an ultimately futile effort. But Sisyphus is not even really an appropriate metaphor because Bob has an absolute blast doing what he does. There’s no wasted labor here. His ArtWalk shows are fun. The bands love them. People stumble in from ArtWalk and immediately fall in love with the place. In a way, he’s already succeeded.

BS: I want the building to be restored. But I know that once it is, I’ll no longer be needed there. So it’s a bittersweet pill for me, because the more money that is raised, I’m basically working myself out of a job.

JD: It does not mean you’re not fighting the good fight.

BS: For me, at my stage in life, I’m 56 years old, I see this as being a 10 or 20 year process. They’ve been at it since 2006, its 2019. That’s 13 years, you see how much has gotten done in 13 years. Right? So I’m not really thinking so much about the destination, I’m thinking more about the ride. When my time comes to end the ride that I’ve been on there, I will know that I have given it the best effort that I possibly can, and that’s all that matters. That’s all that matters.

JD: Bob Stoner knows that there is a very good chance the Ritz won’t live and breathe again like it did when he was a kid. But before the current restoration efforts began, the Ritz was dead, and Bob was one of a small group of people that managed to give it a pulse.

(Music: Tin Pot Crowns – Wildebeest)

JD: That’s all for this episode of South Texas Stories. If you’re interested in helping to renovate the Ritz, check out [www.ccritz.com](http://www.ccritz.com), that’s ccritz, one word, and please, give generously. Bob Stoner’s current band is the Tin Pot Crowns, please check them out on Facebook. I’ve seen them live a few times, and yeah, they kick ass, man. See you next time on South Texas Stories.

1. Noah Jeppson. “Ritz Theatre (Corpus Christi, Tx).” Unvisited Dallas, March 22nd, 2012, <http://www.unvisiteddallas.com/archives/1342>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Ritz, “About the Ritz Theatre,” accessed June 4, 2019, www.ccritz.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)