

THE BLOCKS

From the 1920s through the 1970s, the intersection of Belmont and DeVilliers streets was the epicenter of African-American business and social life in Pensacola, Florida. It was here that the progression of musical culture made its mark. Each of the four corners of the intersection feature buildings that date to the neighborhood's historic period and that served as the hub of the blues community in Pensacola.

Over the years, the Belmont-DeVilliers neighborhood has carried a number of nicknames including "Harlem of the South" and "A City Within a City." Others commonly refer to the area as "The Blocks." Whatever it is termed, the neighborhood has played an important and distinct role in Pensacola's history. At the turn of the 20th century, the neighborhood morphed into Pensacola's blues and entertainment mecca.

The 1920s marked a transitional time in which racial boundaries became increasingly sharpened with the enforcement of the Jim Crow Laws in Pensacola. As a result of the changing social climate, African-American life became increasingly concentrated in The Blocks, when segregation and mounting racial tension pushed the city's black residents out of the city center.

In the 40s, 50s and 60s, the neighborhood, clustered around the intersection of Belmont and DeVilliers streets, became a thriving commercial hub. It was also a prominent stop on the Chitlin' Circuit — a network of mostly black-owned entertainment venues that sprang to life during segregation and nurtured the careers of some of the biggest names in contemporary African-American blues singers and music. This was a well-organized connection of clubs, theaters, and music venues where Black musicians, singers, actors, and entertainers could perform and earn money while working their craft in Pensacola. It was supported and bolstered by other businesses, including the independent Black media, neighborhood restaurants, and leaders in the neighborhood, all of which supported the music flowing freely throughout The Blocks during its heyday.

One by one, clubs and performing societies were formed at the intersection of Belmont-DeVilliers to host performers on the Circuit, including the Ambassador Club, Newton's Bunny Club, and Abe's 506. With Black musicians coming and going, Belmont-DeVilliers was bustling. Bumper-to-bumper traffic was common with people milling about the streets going between the various restaurants and clubs.

During this heyday, the blues circuit in The Blocks went a little something like this:

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND PROMOTION:

The Colored Citizen (later The Citizen) was a weekly newspaper published in Pensacola, Florida. It covered issues of interest to the African-American community including highlights of upcoming performances at various neighborhood venues.

WBOP Radio: 421 West Belmont (Upstairs) One of the first African American radio stations in the area, WBOP was housed on the second floor of the building where they churned out a steady stream of blues, jazz and gospel along with the delivery of community news and announcements, including show dates, times and locations. The station was THE source, proving to be essential in keeping the community informed and in touch.

TICKET SALES:

Gussie's Record & Variety Shop: 421 West Belmont (Downstairs) The brick structure, built in 1911, housed a saloon, a grocery, a furniture shop and an upholstery store before Gussie Streeter opened Gussie's Record & Variety Shop. It was a community institution where people listened to and bought records as well as tickets to the shows. The shop was incredibly popular, a musical hangout serving as a gathering space and a symbol of Pensacola's musical history.

SERVICES:

B&B Taxi Company and West Hill Taxi – 417 West Belmont, both Black-owned neighborhood taxi services, transported the attendees to the clubs over the course of years. West Hill's motto was "We Never Sleep; A Phone Call Brings Us on the Run."

Blue Dot Barbecue – 305 North DeVilliers Blue Dot opened in 1947 and was named for its original owners, Blue Robinson and his wife Dorothy ("Dot"). After the shows they would serve hundreds of their "brown bags of burger heaven."

Dwarf's Chicken Shack – 422 West Belmont Loyal customers would crowd the intersection awaiting their chicken, then take their packages home or sit on the curb or the hoods of cars devouring the late-night meals after listening to their favorite performers.

VENUES:

Newton's Sugar Bowl/Bunny Club – 500 West Belmont The Sugar Bowl, owned by JP Newton, was one of the most popular diners in the Belmont-DeVilliers area. The restaurant was known for their beef stew and delicious southern food. The Sugar Bowl would later be named the Bunny Club (in the late 1960s). It served as a nightclub and was a center of nightlife and all things music in the neighborhood.

Abe's 506 Club – 506 West Belmont/Savoy Ballroom (Black USO) 515 West Belmont (venues merged) The popular dance club — largest venue in the neighborhood — owned by Abe Pierce Sr., was known as one of the few places that people of color could congregate in a social. Pierce was known for ushering the era of black entertainers in the Pensacola area. The 506 was a two-story building with a lounge downstairs that was open daily. A large space on the second floor, called the Stardust Room, was available for private events. Each floor could accommodate approximately 400 guests. In the early 1970s, the Pierces bought the Savoy Ballroom and attached the two buildings, which increased capacity to 1400. The Savoy Ballroom gave the community opportunities to see unique entertainment and served as a community center for concerned citizens to help the needy.

ARTISTS:

As talent peaked and the good times rolled, audiences included white as well as black listeners, all of whom were excited by the sounds of the performers on the Chitlin' Circuit in Pensacola. Here is a listing of a few.

Aretha Franklin	Louis Armstrong	Ray Charles	Don McClain and the Cashmeres
Ike & Tina Turner	B.B. King	Fats Domino	Wilson Pickett
James Brown	Etta James	Dinah Washington	Sam and Dave
Sam Cooke	The Goodson Sisters	The Manhattans	Brenda Bee

Sam McClain	Clarence Carter	Bobby “Blue” Bland	Ray Shepherd Band
Millie Jackson	Jr. Parker	James and Bobby Purify	Wally Mercer, Jr.
Count Basie	Dizzy Gillespie	Ella Fitzgerald	Roy Brown
Slim Gaillard	Herman “Junior” Cook	Gigi Gryce	Peggy Scott-Adams
The Four Tops	The O’Jays	Beverly Crosby	Earl “Father” Hines Band
Percy Sledge	Otis Redding	Gwen McCrae	Bobby Moore

TODAY 2017:

With the era of desegregation and the civil rights movement, the Belmont-DeVilliers neighborhood saw a steady decline. Residents moved to other areas of the city and businesses relocated to more populated areas. In 2010, community leaders, active residents and real estate developers all worked together to revitalize this important historical neighborhood, working to restore and recapture the musical history of The Blocks.

WBOP Radio: 421 West Belmont (Upstairs) WBOP Radio station presently serves as an event space called The Record Room, located above Five Sisters Blues Café. The venue features records of famed musicians whose albums were played at the former radio station and who also performed at various neighborhood venues during the 50s, 60s and 70s.

Gussie’s Record & Variety Shop: 421 West Belmont (Downstairs) Gussie’s Record Shop is currently Five Sisters Blues Café, a restaurant built on some of Pensacola’s deepest history. Five Sisters features classic Southern soul food and live music and has been a huge success in the Pensacola community and a large part of the revitalization of the neighborhood.

Newton’s Sugar Bowl/Bunny Club – 500 West Belmont The Bunny Club has housed the DeVilliers Cultural Heritage Museum. Currently, it serves as an event space with gospel afternoons held monthly.

Abe’s 506 Club – 506 West Belmont/Savoy Ballroom 515 West Belmont (venues merged) Chizuko’s Vegan Restaurant, Bar and Music venue now occupies the space at 506. They host a number of music acts each weekend.

Dwarf’s Chicken – 407 North DeVilliers Originally opened as Dwarf’s Chicken Shack (called Dwarf’s because the shack was so small), next to Gussie’s Record Shop, they have moved a block north and are still frying and serving up chicken until the wee hours of the morning.

Blue Dot Barbecue – 310 North DeVilliers No longer serving barbeque, the Blue Dot is still going strong today. Blue Dot maintained a full menu in the 40s, but it was scaled down to just the burger. Ribs are served — only on Saturdays. Blue Dot has added only two other items over the years: chips and sodas. In 1995 they moved from the corner of DeVilliers and Strong streets to the current location — a half block up the street. The burgers’ ingredients and preparation are a well-kept secret, and are loved by all.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARoE3ycNMF8>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7o_67XihhGY

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvESukspdfc>

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