

Remembering Clifford Antone - 1949-2006

A farewell to the man behind the blues

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The last time I saw Clifford Antone, he was working the room.

Clifford was busily holding forth last Saturday night at the big Paramount Theatre gala anniversary street party, which was held smack in the middle of Congress Avenue.

As was often the case over the last couple of years, Clifford had Pinetop Perkins in tow. The 92-year-old blues pianist, who had made his bones playing with Muddy Waters, had relocated from up North to Austin, a city with a far kinder climate. As he had in the past with other blues elders, Antone helped Pinetop get settled, took him out on the town and generally treated him like an esteemed patriarch. Which, of course, in Antone's eyes, he was.

Looking back on last Saturday, I never thought Pinetop would be the last man standing come Tuesday afternoon.

Antone was found dead at his apartment Tuesday. He was 56.

And now we're talking about legacies and landmarks, instead of casually anticipating the next time we'll bump into Cliff somewhere on the town, the rumpled suit and inevitable gimme cap announcing his presence across some dark, crowded room or other.

The slapdash wardrobe was also in evidence the first time I ever encountered Antone. That was back at the original incarnation of the club, across from the Driskill, on then-desolate Sixth Street.

It was 1977 or so, and I'd been across the river at the Armadillo World Headquarters, interviewing Russell Smith of the Amazing Rhythm Aces. Smith happened to ask where the action was once his own gig had concluded. I suggested Antone's and accompanied him to the club, where zydeco king Clifton Chenier was rocking the house. Clifford strode onstage and did a version of his stump speech, the template that sustained him for three decades of introductions — please welcome this "fantastic" musician and his "great, great band" to the Antone's stage.

Antone's was Clifford's Carnegie Hall, his La Scala; it was the temple he created to showcase the best of the best.

He was as much an evangelist as an entrepreneur. To him, blues musicians — from titans such as Muddy Waters, B.B. King, James Brown and Jimmy Reed to relative unknowns such as Eddie Taylor, Barbara Lynn and Sunnyland Slim — were great American artists, every bit the equal of

Georgia O'Keeffe, Frank Lloyd Wright or John Ford, and they deserved to be celebrated on precisely that scale.

You couldn't understand Clifford Antone without knowing he was from Port Arthur, and knowing why that mattered. Even as a kid, to hear him tell it, the blues was all he cared about. Struck by lightnin', as the song says.

A hardscrabble town of refineries and pipelines, Port Arthur exists at a crossroads. Houston and Louisiana have been a fertile breeding ground for country, Cajun, zydeco, blues, soul, swamp pop, jazz, Western swing, rock, R&B and more — and Port Arthur lies right at the heart of it.

Traveling down to Southeast Texas and listening to the dirty bop and the blues shuffles and the raw, nasal honky tonk fill the humid air explains a lot about Clifford, and about Antone's and the community he nurtured and celebrated for more than three decades.

Until Tuesday, Clifford held forth almost the whole time, inciting the crowd to give it up, lauding the "great," "wonderful," "legendary" musicians he was about to introduce, preaching nightly to the midnight choir.

(Last year, Antone traveled down to the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, in the company of friend and bandleader Lucky Tomblin and a handful of other kindred spirits. Clifford hit Jazzfest like he was the king of the Rex Parade, striding into Buddy Guy's dressing room as though he owned the place and even doing unscheduled introductions of blues and swamp-pop acts from the Jazzfest stages. We laughed, imagining Cliff at the Audubon Zoo: "I want you to give it up for this great, great alligator. And this flamingo, one of the finest young flamingos I've ever had the pleasure to hear. And how about this hippopotamus? Please, folks, give him a hand!")

"We opened July 15, 1975, with Clifton Chenier," he said not long ago, reciting an oft-repeated history. "The second week we had Sunnyland Slim and Big Walter Horton. Sunnyland became the godfather of the club and got every blues guy in Chicago to call me.

"Then Hubert Sumlin came and lived with us for many years on and off. Sumlin and Luther Tucker taught a lot of Austin's young musicians about the blues. We had Texas blues artists like Gatemouth Brown, Johnny Copeland, Albert Collins. Acts like Ray Charles, James Brown, Bobby 'Blue' Bland, B.B. King, Sam and Dave. Country acts like George Jones, Willie Nelson and Ray Price."

When Clifford ran out of marquee names — it seemed he could remember every bill for the past 31 years — he switched gears to talk about the stars-to-be his club helped nurture. About how the Fabulous Thunderbirds became the Antone's house band. About the night a young Stevie Ray Vaughan cut it up and held his own onstage with the fearsome Albert King. About the time hometown blues belter Lou Ann Barton curled up on Muddy Waters' lap like a kitten. About the young kids — Eve Monsees, the Keller Brothers, Gary Clark Jr. — who make up Antone's third generation of home-grown talent.

Although he would have been the first to tell you it's all about the musicians, the story of Antone's is the story of Clifford Antone: one man, one joint, one unquenchable passion. Even though the man himself has passed, that passion and its intertwined legacy is still as pure a thing as exists in this dirty old world.