

<http://www.austin360.com/music/content/music/stories/2006/05/24antone.html>

Antone: 'Heart Of Austin Music' Had Blues In His Blood

Impresario nurtured musicians and city to national prominence

By [Michael Corcoran](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Tuesday, May 23, 2006

A giant, an institution, a generous soul whose obsessive love of the blues helped make this college town nationally known for stomping-good live music and passionate listeners is gone.

The news shot through the Austin air Tuesday afternoon like a stinging Albert King guitar lead: Clifford Antone is dead.

By giving Chicago blues legends a club in Texas to play, as well as launching a raucous classroom where upstarts such as the Fabulous Thunderbirds, Charlie Sexton and Stevie Ray Vaughan could learn at the feet of the masters, Antone forever changed the Texas music landscape. He was 56.

Police spokeswoman Laura Albrecht said officers responded to a call at the Towers of Town Lake condominiums on Interstate 35 approximately 1:15 p.m. Tuesday. They found Antone dead in his apartment. The cause of death has not been determined, pending results of an autopsy, though police said the death did not appear suspicious.

A celebration of Antone's life is planned for his namesake club for 4 p.m. Wednesday. It will be free to the public.

Fans, musicians and club owners began gathering at his namesake club on West Fifth Street around 5 p.m., leaving flowers, photos and notes.

Broken Spoke owner James White spoke of his friendship with Antone.

"It's a terrible shock," White said. "Clifford and I were such good pals. He was a great guy, and if something happened to me, I know he would come to my club."

Later Tuesday, a photograph of Antone rested in his usual seat at the Broken Spoke as Alvin Crow and his band played "Rainin' in My Heart."

"I feel like the heart of Austin music has been ripped out," said drummer Chris Layton, echoing the sentiments of many stunned mourners.

Antone was like the music scene's maitre d', greeting friends and strangers warmly, always ready to help in any way he could. He was known for paying acts more than they took in at the door, dipping into his own wallet to help both aging bluesmen and young, broke enthusiasts who moved to Austin from all over the world because they had heard that the world's greatest blues club was here.

One by one, Antone's heroes passed away — Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Albert Collins, Jimmy Reed, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown — but not before they played the

club Antone opened as a 25-year-old in 1975 on Sixth Street, back before Sixth Street was known as an entertainment district.

At that first of four locations, he'd often book them for a week at a time so the original electric blues cats wouldn't have to travel between gigs. Every night, Antone would stand at the side of the stage with a broad smile. His gushy introductions were almost as legendary as his club.

While much of the Austin population became aware of Antone mainly through two high-profile marijuana busts — in 1984 and 1997 — for which he served two stints in federal prison, those who knew him personally describe a warm, big-hearted blues encyclopedia who truly did it all for the music more than the money.

"He loved to book the big names, but he also liked to turn folks on to the great sidemen," said Connie Hancock of the Texana Dames. Eddie Taylor, Wayne Bennett, Hubert Sumlin, Matt "Guitar" Murphy and Luther Tucker may have been better known for backing others, but at Antone's they were superstars.

"Playing at Antone's for the first time was an incredible thrill," said guitarist Eve Monsees, who was called up to join a blues jam when she was just 15. "Clifford had never heard me play, but when he asked me who I liked and I said 'Magic Sam' he figured I'd be OK."

"He was a giant," said blues musician Jon Blondell. "He lived for the music, and if you were a musician, that meant he existed for you."

He backed his affinity with an unmatched knowledge of the blues and taught a class on the subject at the University of Texas for the past two years.

"How many other teachers at the University of Texas got their name in the title of the course?" said Kevin Mooney, the music professor who organized "Blues According to Clifford Antone." "He adored the students and loved giving back to them. He didn't want that class to end every day; there was so much material he wanted to share with them."

If you liked the music of Lightnin' Slim, Snooky Pryor or Sunnyland Slim, you had a good friend in Antone, the cherubic Lebanese American with the askew hair, who grew up in Port Arthur and came to love the blues when he traced the roots of acts such as Cream and Fleetwood Mac.

Yet Antone was known as much for promoting the future of music as for tracing its past.

"I used to come down from Kansas City to go to Antone's before I moved here," said musician Guy Forsyth, a mainstay on the club's stage in recent years. "It was about the third time I was there that Clifford came over and introduced himself. He could see I was digging the music and made me feel at home, a feeling Antone's had had ever since."

Antone didn't just befriend and hire younger musicians; he took them under his wing.

"When me and my family moved to town in 1980, Clifford completely opened up all his resources to help us," said Hancock.

"When Clifford came out of prison the second time (in 2003), he told me it was harder than the first time," Hancock said. "The pain was deeper, but he also seemed to want to help as many people as possible after he got out."

Antone organized a Hurricane Katrina benefit at the Erwin Center in September, starring Willie Nelson and the Neville Brothers. He has also helped surviving bluesmen like 92-year-old Pinetop Perkins move to Austin, arranging for nursing care and an apartment. "I don't know what I'm gonna do now. I may stay here; I may not," Perkins said Tuesday before playing hymns in Antone's honor in his South Austin apartment.

Antone was 18 when he moved to Austin in 1968 to attend the University of Texas, with plans to become a lawyer. That year, he was arrested for trying to smuggle a bag of marijuana across the border at Laredo. The case was dismissed, but Antone dropped out of school and discovered a new passion. "When I finally heard the Chicago blues, man, it was like I finally discovered what had been in my mind my whole life," he told the *American-Statesman* in 1997.

After the first Antone's closed, the club moved far north, but it soon found a new home on Guadalupe Street near the UT campus. Antone said that "between '75 and '85, I don't think there's any question we were the best blues club in the world."

But Antone had to relinquish ownership of the third — and some might say best — Antone's at 2915 Guadalupe St. in 1984 when he was convicted of possessing more than 1,000 pounds of marijuana and served 14 months of a five-year sentence in federal prison.

When he was released, he remained active in the booking of the club, introducing the acts and occasionally sitting in on bass guitar.

The club is currently owned by a board of directors headed by sister — and primary family survivor — Susan Antone.

Clifford Antone's troubles worsened in 1996 as federal agents investigated a drug ring responsible for smuggling more than 5 tons of marijuana from Mexico to the United States and Canada. Antone's name appeared in the ledger of an El Paso drug dealer, who used the book to keep track of his suppliers and buyers, court documents show.

Agents then raided Antone's Town Lake condo and seized \$60,000 in cash, a 50-pound scale, shredded papers, 2 ounces of marijuana and a vial of cocaine.

A federal grand jury indicted Antone in 1997 on charges of conspiracy to deliver marijuana and money laundering. Facing a possible life sentence, Antone cooperated with prosecutors and pleaded guilty in 1999.

In December 2002, he was released to a halfway house in Austin, serving out the final six months of his four-year sentence.

In the hearts of local fans, Antone's musical accomplishments far overshadow his criminal record. He has helped make Austin what it is today: a live music mecca where the young learn from the old and those who move on continue to live in what they've left behind.

Singer Delbert McClinton summed up Antone in a statement he released Tuesday. "He loved the music so much," McClinton recalled. "Like nobody else I've ever known."

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Additional material from staff writers Joe Gross, Lynne Margolis and Tony Plohetski

<http://www.austin360.com/music/content/music/stories/2006/05/24artists.html>

The Man Who Helped Make The Musicians

Stevie Ray Vaughan was his most famous find, but dozens of musicians owe part of their careers to Clifford Antone.

Wednesday, May 24, 2006

'You know, I didn't get in this as a business,' Clifford Antone told the Austin American-Statesman last year as he talked about his namesake club and its changing role in the blues. 'I got in it to bring the blues here; that's it. Almost all of my great friends are dead: Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, John Lee Hooker.'

For three decades, Antone was one of the nation's best-known and biggest supporters of blues music, but he and his club helped nurture other musicians as well.

Here's a sampling of the artists who played Antone's and received a lot of his support:

Marcia Ball

Lou Ann Barton

Wayne Bennett

Doyle Bramhall

Doyle Bramhall II

Clarence 'Gatemouth' Brown

W.C. Clark

Albert Collins

James Cotton

Double Trouble (Chris Layton and Tommy Shannon)

Fabulous Thunderbirds (including Kim Wilson, Jimmy Vaughan)

Buddy Guy

John Lee Hooker

Albert King

Lazy Lester

Barbara Lynn

Eve Monsees

Ian Moore

Matt 'Guitar' Murphy

Pinetop Perkins

Jimmy Reed
Doug Sahm
Bob Schneider
Son Seals
Charlie Sexton
Will Sexton
Angela Strehli
Hubert Sumlin
Eddie Taylor
Susan Tedeschi
Luther Tucker
Big Joe Turner
Stevie Ray Vaughan
Muddy Waters
Junior Wells
Lavelle White

<http://www.austin360.com/music/content/music/stories/2006/05/24quotes.html>

Memories of the blues

Central Texans Respond To The Death Of Clifford Antone

Wednesday, May 24, 2006

"He was a giant. He lived for the music, and if you were a musician, that meant he existed for you."

--Jon Blondell, blues musician

—

"I feel like the heart of Austin music has been ripped out."

--Chris Layton, drummer

—

"How many other teachers at the University of Texas got their name in the title of the course? He adored the students and loved giving back to them. He didn't want that class to end every day; there was so much material he wanted to share with them. He brought a lot of musicians into the classroom, and the students just went nuts."

--Kevin Mooney, music professor at University of Texas, who organized the class Blues According to Clifford Antone

"I consider him the most iconic role model for how live music should be embraced in this community."

--Paul Oveisi, owner, Momo's Club

"Clifford saw so much genius in the young adults we serve; he did so much to bring the resources together to help them get a second chance."

--Richard Halpin, American YouthWorks

<http://www.austin360.com/news/content/music/stories/2006/05/28antone.html>

Antone: The man who gave Austin the blues

Clifford Antone wanted us to share in his appreciation of music

Friday, May 26, 2006

Clifford Antone delivered the Blues Sermon to me for the first time more than 30 years ago — where it all began, at the original Antone's, on Sixth Street across from the Driskill Hotel. I was a teenager, ignorant in a thousand ways, sent by The Daily Texan (the University of Texas student newspaper) to write some words about the man's whimsical blues experiment.

Antone greeted me warmly enough — a guy who seemed older than his 25 years, I thought. It was daytime. We sat alone in the middle of his new club, a sparkling and stylish place with a beautiful mahogany bar on the west wall and a little postage stamp of a stage in the corner. Right away, he asked about my musical tastes. When I muttered something about the Allman Brothers Band, Antone responded like this:

The Allman Brothers? Those guys are real fine musicians, don't get me wrong. But they don't have nothin' to do with it, man! You need to be listening to guys like Sonny Boy Williamson and Howlin' Wolf and Willie Dixon and Elmore James — the real heroes of American music. People talk about Cream, Eric Clapton, the Rolling Stones. But those guys owe everything to people like Sonny Boy Williamson. Have you HEARD of Sonny Boy Williamson? Oh, man

Antone did most of the talking for the next two hours — passionately, patiently stating his case for the blues and the importance of honoring the originals who played it. He didn't talk so much about his new club, or his dreams, or his prospects of financial success. Antone was into the music — and more than that, the heart and soul of the people who created it.

Clifford Antone never tired of that sermon — and he delivered it thousands of times, to friends and strangers, through four different incarnations of Antone's, to the very last days of his life. (At only 56, he died Tuesday, at home, unexpectedly, apparently of natural causes.) Antone thought of Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf the way some Americans think of Lincoln, or Whitman, or the Wright Brothers. This conviction defined him. It's as if I can feel the fire of it in the memorial votive candles that flicker yet inside the current Antone's on Fifth Street. That, and the ache that comes with the growing realization that the father of Austin blues is really, truly gone.

From the very beginning, Clifford Antone offered us Muddy Waters and Clifton Chenier and Willie Dixon and B.B. King — certain that we would love it, certain that the sheer integrity of the music would knock Austin off its feet. It took years. We were slow learners. How many times he almost lost the club. . . .

"When we started the club on Sixth Street, I honestly thought to myself, 'How am I going to fit all the people who want to hear Sunnyland Slim into this place?' I swear to God, I thought they'd be lined up and down Congress Avenue," he said to me in the summer of 1990. "I thought you could do afternoon shows! I thought people would show up at 4 o'clock in the the afternoon to hear Sunnyland Slim play.

"It never crossed my mind that people wouldn't come, or they'd squabble over a \$2 cover charge. And when they didn't come to see these important people, it hurt me. It made me very bitter for a long time."

There were hard times always — even in the 1980s, when the club finally began to find its stride on Guadalupe Street. Rachel Ferguson, who helped book the club in its early days, once recalled, "If the door was short, Clifford would reach into his pocket and pay the difference himself." The man couldn't stand to see people who gave from the heart come up short.

Antone's enjoyed a golden age in the 1980s — when blues gave soul to what had once been an old Shakey's Pizza Parlor on Guadalupe Street. It was a frumpy building, always choked with smoke, full of rot and bad plumbing. Yet Antone's was the Barton Springs of the music scene, pure and clear — even though Clifford missed a good 14 months of it serving his first federal prison sentence. And after midnight, when the music really kicked in, the building honked and howled like some happy blues freight train chugging deep into the night.

It was the golden age of Jimmie Vaughan and Stevie Vaughan, regular visits by Albert Collins and Johnny Copeland and Otis Rush, a jammed dance floor, so many young women dancing without partners, spinning in slow circles with their eyes closed and their arms floating free, feeling the sting in their toes from some Kim Wilson harmonica solo. It was glorious.

And forever there is a memory of Clifford Antone locking up the empty club at 4 o'clock in the morning. He pauses on his way out, touching a photo of Robert Johnson near the door. "Gotta keep moving," he says. "There's a hell hound on my trail."

Clifford Antone had a lot of child in him. He had a child's passion, a child's appetites, a child's insistence, a child's failings. He wore a man's clothes, a good suit — but usually with gym shoes, and a ball cap, and always with his shirttail out. Antone always had this world-weary look about him. His eyes were slate blue.

He was a complex man, and no angel — there is the matter of his prison record, after all. But the man was unfailingly kind.

Richard Halpin, founder of American Youthworks, remembers meeting the young Clifford Antone in 1975 or 1976. Halpin came to him with this idea: blues players, connecting with musicians at the Travis County Jail, with the aim of raising prisoners' self-esteem and motivating them to consider self-improvement in education.

"Every other club owner in town said no thanks," recalls Halpin. "Clifford said, 'Sure, I'll help. What can I do?'"

As a child dreams, so did Clifford Antone. In the 1990s, I met him downtown, in front of a hulky, shabby warehouse — the building that would one day become the Austin Children's Museum. Antone knew, even in good times, that he would have to vacate the Guadalupe Street building and find a new location. It was inevitable. They were having trouble making ends meet.

Antone said this warehouse — this monster of a renovation project — would become Antone's new home. As we walked through the guts of it, he imagined a club of sliding walls. Open it wide for B.B. King. Make it small and intimate for the local shows. Hey: If the House of Blues could make it happen, why not Clifford Antone? The new Antone's would be massive and fun — but like many dreams, it remained just that. The fourth and last Antone's eventually opened on West Fifth Street.

Clifford Antone was generous, yet constantly in need of money — a precarious combination. He bought guitars for budding musicians, kept up with the families of deceased bluesmen, even helped pay funeral expenses. He loved baseball, more a White Sox kind of guy than a Cubs fan. Antone loved being a host, making women feel safe, escorting them to their cars at the club. He was a great dancer. The guitarist Bill Campbell nicknamed him "Abdul the Dancing Bear."

"He was the quintessential gentleman," recalls Diana Ray, a lifelong friend who helped book the club in its 1980s glory days. "And there are a lot of women who will tell you the same thing. No matter how scrubby you looked, he would always tell you how beautiful you were, ask if you needed anything, made you feel good about yourself. He truly loved women in the most beautiful way, in a way few men in this world can really understand."

Last year, I shared an evening with Clifford Antone at a dinner party. It wasn't a music function; we were surprised to run into each other. Some of the guests didn't know the man or his story. He was achingly polite that night, made jokes at his own expense, drank water, only water. We laughed about that day on Sixth Street in 1975, how I still hadn't learned the lesson of the blues, but that I was still listening to the sermon.

Clifford starting talking about guitars — the depth of his passion and knowledge was, once again, over my head — but I remember how fondly he talked about the lines of those cool, stylish Gibsons, the big ones. He remarked that he once had a huge guitar collection, more than a hundred in all, but they were gone now. Had to sell 'em. Money issues, you know. "I still have one or two of 'em," he said.

Antone shrugged it all off with a smile — but I couldn't get past it. How sad, I remember thinking, that a man who loves music so much had to part with all these guitars. But in truth, Clifford Antone's life was all about embracing and celebrating treasure — and then learning how to let it go. He'd already said goodbye to Muddy Waters and Clifton Chenier and Albert Collins. And Stevie Ray Vaughan. What were a few guitars?

"He kept the blues alive for us," says Diana Ray. "Now it's our job to carry it on."

"Clifford carried a lot of blues — other people's blues, and he held them close to his chest," says Threadgill's owner Eddie Wilson, who was running the Armadillo World Headquarters when Antone opened his club on Sixth Street. "But the main thing he perfected was in looking for the very best thing to say about folks. It's going to take a whole lot of people to pick up that slack."

In the spirit of duty, I visited Antone's for a few minutes on Thursday night, read the memorial cards, listened to the beat of the band. I took the long way home — making sure to stop by the Guadalupe site on the way.

It's a video store now, and the old entrance has been closed off with cinder blocks and painted white. I saw a scrap of paper in the weeds by the door, thought it was a note. But it was only a credit card receipt.

Standing under the hazy night sky — the scent of barbecue in the distance — I remembered so many heavenly nights in the company of Jimmie and Stevie, Clifton Chenier, Buddy Guy, Jimmy Rogers, Otis Rush, Kim Wilson, James Cotton, Albert Collins, Albert King, and how Clifford Antone and his sermon made it all possible. It was a lonesome night, and I left feeling kind of blue.

<http://www.austin360.com/music/content/music/stories/2006/05/26kelso.html>

Kelso: Icon? Nah, Antone was even better

By John Kelso

Friday, May 26, 2006

The bottom line on Clifford Antone: He was one heckuva good fella.

The Austin blues club owner was found dead Tuesday. I didn't know Clifford as well as I would have liked. When I interviewed John Lee Hooker at Antone's first club at Sixth and Brazos streets in the early '70s, I didn't even know there was a Clifford Antone.

But the one time I ever asked him for a favor, he delivered. And he didn't have to do it. He owed me nothing. He just had a good heart.

Last fall a friend of mine, Jana Spangler, who has a barbershop up near the University of Texas called the Banana Moon Hair Saloon, had a problem. One of her hips had gone out and she needed hip replacement surgery. Jana, who lived with pretty much constant pain, didn't have much money. And I was getting real tired of watching her limp while she trimmed my beard.

So I gave it some thought, and decided I'd call Clifford Antone to see if he could help out by letting us use his club for a fundraiser.

Before I called Antone for help, I'd had just one major discussion with him — for a smart-aleck column I wrote three years ago when he was working as a greeter at Güero's Taco Bar while living in a halfway house.

"So what do you do for work when you're a famous former Austin blues club owner and you finally get out of the joint after being busted for dealing 9,000 pounds of pot?" I wrote. "You work as a greeter at a South Austin Mexican food restaurant. What else?"

I wouldn't have talked to me if I had written something snotty like that about myself. But when I called Antone, laid out Jana's problem, and explained how we could sure use his club to raise money for her operation, he invited me over to his apartment in one of those fancy towers on Town Lake.

Then, when I got there, he said, sure, the place is yours.

No if's, and's or but's. Sure, go ahead, he said. It's all yours. All you gotta pay is the sound guys, he said.

He didn't have to do that.

The fundraiser went just great. We raised about \$5,000, and Jana got the surgery, meaning she can now cut hair without wincing. Kinky Friedman showed up and played, as did a funny musical duo called Rick 'n' James, who have a song out called "Aggies Like Sheep." The Calvin Russell Band and Dale Watson played. Jana paid the sound guys about \$350 for their work, but guess what? The sound guys gave her the money back.

"And the bartenders had their own little pool going and they gave me about \$600," Jana recalled.

So sure, Clifford Antone was a local legend for his music business. He's one of the reasons Austin is called the Live Music Capital of the World. Muddy Waters, Doug Sahm and Pinetop Perkins played at his clubs. And some day, I'll just bet you there will be a statue of him next to Stevie Ray Vaughan down on Town Lake.

But when I think back on Clifford Antone, the main thing I'll remember about him is that he was just one really nice guy. Or, as Jana put it, "It oozed out of him, and it affected other people."

When you get right down to it, isn't that all that really matters?

John Kelso's column appears on Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays. Contact him at 445-3606 or jkkelso@statesman.com.

<http://www.austin360.com/music/content/music/stories/2006/05/25antone.html>

Clifford Antone - 1949-2006

At Antone's, a deeper blues is a fine tribute

Musicians and fans pack namesake club to honor Austin icon

By [Joe Gross](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Thursday, May 25, 2006

As it has been so many Austin nights, Antone's was the place to be Wednesday. A packed house, hugs and tears, stories exchanged, electric blues roaring from the stage.

There was just one person missing: Clifford Antone.

Hundreds of fans and dozens of musicians turned out for a combination wake and blues jam to pay tribute to Antone, the club's founder and an Austin music fixture known worldwide for his devotion to the blues.

The free show resembled a jazz funeral, with the solemn faces that ringed the outside of the club all night soon dancing in jubilation to music from such acts as Gary Clark Jr., Guy Forsyth, Monte Montgomery and Joe Ely.

Del Castillo played a Spanish version of "The Godfather Theme," announcing that it was the first song played for Antone in heaven. After Papa Mali performed the gospel number "Glory Glory Hallelujah," he announced, "There are no jails in heaven."

The blues jam included Jimmie Vaughan; Bob Dylan's guitar player, Denny Freeman; and W.C. Clark.

Darcie Fromholz, a waitress at Antone's in the '80s, was typical of the crowd: somber yet ready to party.

"It's time to take it to the streets and march to the second-line beat," she said.

Antone, 56, was found dead at his Towers of Town Lake condominium Tuesday afternoon. Police said the death did not appear to be suspicious, and an autopsy is pending.

Mayor Will Wynn said a memorial event cosponsored by the city is planned for June 3 at the Palmer Events Center but added that the club was Antone's most vital legacy.

"I think the most important tribute is that Antone's survives and remains an iconic piece of the fabric of Austin," Wynn said.

Fans, well-wishers, mourners and folks who just wanted to get out of the late afternoon heat lined up outside Antone's nearly an hour before doors opened at 4 p.m. Police closed street lanes closest to the club at 213 W. Fifth St. to accommodate the crowd that grew larger as the night wore on.

Bill Hughes was one of the first in line. A longtime roots music fan, he once found himself sitting next to Antone at the Broken Spoke without knowing who Antone was.

"I was asking him questions about the band, and he couldn't have been nicer," Hughes said. "He described himself as a 'lifelong professional listener.' "

The free show reached its 600-person club capacity inside of an hour, with the staff enforcing a one-out, one-in policy.

Blues guitarist Gary Clark Jr. opened the show with an hour-long set.

Bass player Nick Travis watched from stage right, near Clifford Antone's traditional listening spot. An Austin musician who has played with blues artists such as Lavelle White and Guy Forsyth, Travis had known Antone for more than 25 years.

"Seeing all these people, it's really starting to hit me that he's gone," Travis said. "Clifford was Old Man River; he was just always around." Travis later joined Clark onstage.

Although Antone no longer owned or booked his namesake club, now at its fourth location, he frequently introduced acts onstage there.

He stayed close to the blues scene despite a shrinking fan base as many of the aging greats who once played his club died. Although the club booked rock acts many nights, Antone continued to push young blues players.

His advocacy was dimmed only by two federal prison sentences, in the mid-1980s for marijuana possession and in 1999 for conspiracy to deliver marijuana and money laundering.

Fans were not talking about those lapses Wednesday night, however.

Carlyne Majer ran the Soap Creek Saloon with husband from 1973 to 1985 and worked for Antone when he was establishing his record company.

"What I admired most about Clifford was his resilience in the club business," she said. "It's very tough, but he withstood it all because of the music."

Sandi Deming, a lifelong friend, worked the door Wednesday.

"Clifford was the sort of guy who would go to everyone's funeral," Deming said, choking up. "It's all of our loss."

Wednesday morning, signs popped up all over town paying tribute to Antone. "God bless you Clifford Antone," read the Paramount Theatre marquee. "Bless You Clifford" read the ever-changing sign on the old Cinema West theater on South Congress Avenue.

Longtime Austin artist Brian Curley printed 200 posters commemorating Antone's life and brought them to the club.

"We just gave them away because Clifford was such a great guy, and they were gone in 20 minutes," Curley said.

Cutter Brandenburg, Stevie Ray Vaughan's one-time road manager, held court at the corner of the bar, watching Clark wail away.

"There should be a statue of Clifford right next to Stevie," he said, "I don't know anybody else in this industry who reached out to so many artists, young or old."

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Additional material from staff writer Michael Corcoran.

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XL Music
Remembering Clifford Antone - 1949-2006

A Farewell To The Man Behind The Blues

By John T. Davis

Wednesday, May 24, 2006

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.