

The Vagabonds and Arthur Godfrey. Clover Club, 1946.



18A

01

Eden Roc Hotel. April, 1980.



19A

02

Ella Fitzgerald and other artists. MIA, 1952.



22A

05

Al Schenk, Abner Silver and Nat King Cole. Di Lido Hotel, 1954.



23A

06

THE SOUND

"Ain't Misbehavin'" at the Eden Roc Hotel. Year unknown.



20A

03

The Beatles. Miami, 1964.



21A

04

Count Basie. 1965.



24A

07

Olympia Theater. 1955.



25A

08

OF MIAMI

words_hyan de freitas. photo_courtesy of historymiami. design_ivana cruz.

The Music Issue • Distraction 37

Traditions and legacies aren't built overnight. Like the expression, "Rome wasn't built in one day," it took years for the Miami music scene to evolve into what it is now. What this scene consists of is difficult to pin down, but this has always been the case. Not only is there a diverse and rich history representative of the city's population, Miami's music scene has also consistently made wide-reaching contributions to the American musical landscape.

➤ A SCENE DIVIDED: POP ON MIAMI BEACH, R&B IN OVERTOWN.

The documentary film "All Shook Up," produced by Mia Laurenzo of WLRN, offers great insight into one of the many "glory days" of the Miami music scene. As the documentary explains, some of the great pop legends that came to perform in Miami arrived under spectacular circumstances.

Miami Beach's Fontainebleau Hotel is where Elvis Presley stayed when he arrived in Miami to perform on Frank Sinatra's final Timex-sponsored television special on ABC in 1960. Specifically, the segment commemorated Presley's return to the States from his time away in the U.S. military. In the special, Sinatra and Presley shared a now famous duet. And those that consider Miami to be "out of the way" for traveling acts should refer to The Beatles. Miami was the location of the second appearance by The Beatles on "The Ed Sullivan Show" in 1964.

Beyond being just factoids for trivia, these landmark visits helped turn Miami into a premier destination during this period, enhancing the clout of the local music scene. It's been reported that The Beatles loved Miami's weather and beaches. Climate played a major role in attracting music artists and fans alike. As is the case today, the warm weather offered a reprieve from colder, more bleak climates and tempted musicians to purchase permanent and seasonal homes in Miami.

In Overtown, a musical and cultural shift was occurring. According to History Miami, Overtown, like it still is today, was blighted from poverty and was rich in cultural activities and institutions. Perhaps this line from a document from The Black Archives History and Research Foundation Of South Florida best puts the Overtown scene into perspective: "When residents of Overtown would walk the streets of the area, it wasn't an uncommon occurrence to pass right by Nat King Cole, Bojangles, Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald and others."

There was just as much musical talent coming out of Overtown as there was coming in. It was the home for local rhythm and blues. The music being produced and showcased there inspired many of the artists, white and black, who were drawn into its raw and soulful sounds.

Steve Alaimo, a University of Miami graduate, was drawn into the Overtown scene and later went on to become a successful

recording artist and record producer. When he first started performing locally after graduation, Alaimo would leave the hotel venues of Miami Beach for the nightclubs of Overtown. He says he definitely felt, as a white male, that he was ahead of his time.

"Like you go to school to learn chemistry or math, I went down there and listened to them and tried to soak up as much as I could," Alaimo said. "That's where my education in the music business came from."

The education payed off as Alaimo soaked in that R&B music he found in Overtown's "Little Broadway." Alaimo adopted that sound and brought it with him when he performed regularly at the Eden Roc Hotel in Miami Beach. At the time, hotels provided live bands and Alaimo chose to regularly perform with African-American bands.

While Alaimo was welcome to perform and watch others perform across town at any time, his black bandmates were only allowed to enter venues when performing. "When work was over, they went home," Alaimo said. Segregation often made performing and traveling difficult. Despite this, the musical talents of Overtown were able to make a lasting contribution to music, one that deeply influenced the next generation of Miami music.

➤ THE DISCO DAYS

After a successful recording career, Alaimo would go on to work with Miami music mogul and legend Henry Stone. Specifically, they shaped TK

Records into one of the premier record labels in town.

Some of the styles associated with TK Records, of course, included the genres that Alaimo so closely studied from Overtown: R&B and soul. With the rise of disco music, TK Records made artists like KC and the Sunshine Band and Betty Wright into household (or dance floor) names.

Essentially, TK Records was on the cusp of one of the great signature musical exports of Miami: the discovery of "The Miami Sound."

➤ THE MIAMI SOUND

If you ask any veteran of the Miami music scene, or even any Miami native, about the "Miami Sound," the initial reaction is most often the same. You can almost see the nostalgia sweeping over them as they smile at the thought of one of Miami's finest creations. Creation is perhaps the wrong word, however, because the sound developed gradually from a mixture of musical styles and did so organically, Alaimo pointed out.

An influx of immigrants in Miami led to diverse musical backgrounds. Miami gained an influence of Afro-American, Cuban and Jamaican music flairs.

"The Miami sound is unbelievable because once you've got the grooves and the Afro-American beats, the Cuban influence, the Jamaican influence and the R&B and pop influence, what more do you need?" Alaimo said.

Raul Murciano Junior, associate dean and program director of media writing and production at the Frost School of Music, was one of the founding members of a band called the Miami Latin Boys. The group had to change their name once they added two girls, one of them being UM alumna Gloria Estefan. Although the music they made wasn't widely being referred to as the Miami sound yet, they called themselves the "Miami Sound Machine."

Murciano puts the Miami Sound Machine, along with artists like Willy Chirino and Carlos Oliva and the Judges' Nephews, between the outliers of music that was true to the Cuban



GUSMAN GOES WAY BACK. The University of Miami Summer Symphony plays a concert at Gusman Hall as part of the "Meet Me at the Pops" series on June 4, 1961.

tradition and music that imitated popular songs back then.

Specifically, Murciano describes the music as a convergence of traditional Cuban musical styles that also had elements of funk and R&B and elements of mainstream pop-rock. Many of these pop-oriented Miami sound bands played at events known as "open houses."

These were young, local groups who held dances at various halls around Miami. These groups would draw inspiration from covers of both American and Cuban music for the most part, along with some originals, said Murciano. This made sense, considering the dual cultural sources they were influenced by, making for a unique experience.

"It didn't sound 100 percent Anglo and it certainly didn't sound 100 percent Cuban at all," Murciano said. "It was kind of a hybrid thing."

Groups like the Miami Sound Machine moved on to achieve more mainstream, commercial success. Artists like Gloria Estefan were able to cross over into the pop world, which opened Miami's sound to the world.

Then came Miami Bass, otherwise known as Booty Bass. Steve Alaimo found himself involved with this genre as well through his work in Vision Records.

Again, Overtown played a role in the development of that genre, along with Liberty City. Even Alaimo, who before worked in the pop, R&B and dance music world, found himself involved in the production of Miami Bass. After working with disco and popular dance music, Alaimo founded Criteria Studios. It was there that many Miami Bass records were produced.

"It's just grooves, R&B grooves. There's nothing really that got invented, it just got changed," Alaimo said of the inspirations for Miami bass and hip-hop in general.

➤ ROCKIN' AGES

The Miami sound was not the only sound coming out of the city. Also erupting were the sounds of gritty guitars and even grittier vocals. An alternative to the mainstream dance music pumping out of mainstream radio was the alt-rock and punk rock that had its own dedicated scene in Miami and was being played by stations like WVUM.

Norman Waas, aka Stormin' Norman, was a DJ at WVUM at a time where the only college station in Miami was a home to those local rock and new wave acts.

Back then, what was playing on MTV wasn't necessarily music that commercial stations were playing in Miami. Music from groups like Depeche Mode, Duran Duran, Devo, Elvis Costello and The Ramones went up against disco hits from the Bee Gees and Gloria Gaynor.

The same battle of genres existed within the university. Although the tastes in music among the student body were as eclectic then as they are now, there were moments when a mainstream-leaning student body would align itself with the more alternative WVUM.

Waas recalls watching R.E.M. perform on campus. "I still remember vividly four guys getting out of a white camel van that they drove down from Athens, Georgia. It showed a maturation of the student body in that they were listening to it and it was great," he said.

To really delve into what the music scene had to offer, one had to travel off campus, though. During the time right at the brink of the digital revolution, record stores played a vital role in supporting music that hadn't yet reached widespread success. Fulfilling the role that blogs most closely accomplish now, record store clerks were seen as the authority on music. They were the tastemakers. Waas noted that whatever music the record store owners liked at the time was usually similar to the tastes of the student body.

Outside of school, Waas also has fond memories of going to see both local and lesser known national acts play at nearby venues. He remembers Richard Shelter, widely considered a hero and major contributor to Miami rock music, and the bands he promoted and helped foster at 27 Birds, a local venue for rock music in Coconut Grove. Such bands include The Kids, perhaps better known by one of its members, Johnny Depp. Though there was a small community of rock appreciators present, there was still room for frustration.

Local rock legends like Charlie Pickett, who had much local fan support and critical acclaim, weren't able to break out of the Miami scene. "Poised on the precipice of the big breakthrough, he walked away frustrated, fed-up and convinced he'd never be more than a regional wannabe," wrote Lee Zimmerman of Pickett for the *Miami New Times* in a preview of a 2008 comeback performance in Fort Lauderdale.

As the film "Rock and a Hard Place: Another Night at the Agora" documents, although Miami was home to immense rock talent which drew large crowds and other national rock acts, the rock scene never established a brand for itself like the grunge movement typically associated with Seattle. Glen Kolotkin, a producer interviewed in the documentary, placed some of that blame on disco.

"I hadn't heard any rock and roll coming from Florida, but disco was a big thing," Kolotkin said in the film. "Florida, in my mind at least, became the disco capital of the United States."

The film goes on to reference Miami's location, a bit out of the way for tourists and touring bands, as part of the blame for the scene never really concretely establishing itself - a setback that oftentimes still holds true today.

Despite what some pessimists may say, these difficulties didn't completely do away with Miami's rock scene. In fact, local bands like Deaf Poets and latin rockers Arboles Libres prove that Miami's signature diversity even today has found its way into the rock scene.

So then what's the music scene like in Miami today? Have the DJs really taken over and left behind no remnants of the Miami sound? Or is it still as difficult to define and as complex as it always has been. The answer seems to be the latter.



Elvis Presley. Miami, 1960.

"I think it's a living, vibrant flowing thing that continues to evolve," Murciano said. "As we continue to bring into Miami a broader cultural spectrum from other countries and from other cultures, that experiment just continues to develop and grow in relation to that."

Murciano also noted that this makes the Miami sound harder to define and classify. As a result of the blending and melding of different genres together, you get that sound that is uniquely from Miami and can be found nowhere else. As long as you have that, you have the Miami sound.

"It's not just Cuban music anymore, there's a lot of other stuff that's thrown into the pot," he said. He compares the evolution of Miami music to science, juxtaposing music to energy and arguing that music, like energy, cannot be created or destroyed.

In many ways, his idea makes sense. The "Miami sound," which refers back to dance music with Afro-Cuban elements, for example, drew from traditional music that Cuban immigrants brought with them to Miami. And just how that particular sound was a compilation of others, the city also resonated with rock and R&B influences.

While many music scenes come and go in terms of popularity and impact, Miami's has continued to evolve over generations, with every new group of local artists adding their own influences into the mix and, in turn, shaping the scene in unique and diverse ways.

So if one were to ask what the Miami music scene is made up of and what factors made it what it is today, a possible answer could literally be: everything.