



Kings Theatre in Brooklyn, New York

LIVING HISTORY

**Venues on the National Register of Historic Places
keep the music going**

by Joshua M. Miller



The Heights Theater in Houston, Texas

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE HEIGHTS THEATER



FOR MANY MUSICIANS, THE opportunity to perform in front of an audience can feel like a sacred act. It's an opportunity to honor traditions and those who came before them as well as to build onto those musical legacies. That drive for preservation and continuity also extends to historical venues that host touring roots musicians. Many of these music venues are housed in theaters and other buildings that have been around for decades, even centuries.

The United States' National Park Service created the National Register of Historic Places to coordinate and support efforts to preserve historical buildings. Getting added to the Register can give venues a much-needed boost through additional funding and resources to help with restoration, organization, and presentations.

The application process is seemingly straightforward, yet acceptance is never

a given. If a venue operator believes their building is worthy of preservation, staff members can contact their state's historic preservation office and start compiling a detailed application expressing why it should be added. The application must address three main criteria — age, integrity, and significance. To be considered old enough and historic, the building needs to be at least 50 years old. As for integrity, the building must look largely the same as it did in the past. Finally, to establish the historical significance of the building, applications need to address a range of questions about cultural and architectural significance.

If approved, the application is forwarded to the National Park Service in Washington for further assessment. If added to the Register, the venue is able to apply for federal and state tax credits and take advantage of other incentives and benefits such as access to grants and

assistance with preservation. The Register also establishes a set of protections, and must approve any subsequent updates or changes.

For Texas-based Kessler Presents owner Edwin Cabaniss, who has successfully applied for two theaters — including The Heights Theater in Houston — and is working on a third, the benefits go beyond money. “These buildings have been around long before I was ever on this earth,” he says. “And if I’ve done it right, they’ll be around a lot longer than I’ll be here.”

Here is a look at three venues that have been placed on the Register and what they mean to their communities and roots musicians.

The Heights Theater Houston, Texas

The Heights Theater, which first opened in 1929, features a mix of Spanish and

modern Art Deco architecture. In fact, it's the oldest theater in Houston that remains in its original location.

“They call them suburban theaters, because they were out in the suburbs, so they were named after the communities they're in,” says Cabaniss, who oversees operations at the theater. “The Heights, for example, [refers to] a small community that was annexed by the city of Houston, called the Greater Heights area. This was the theater that was there on Main Street built in the 1920s.”

For many years, the theater served as a vaudeville movie theater with a single screen. “People get news from the front during war times,” says Cabaniss. “That's how a lot of people got a lot of their information, was going to the movie theater. And of course, they'd watch a matinee, and they'd watch other singing cowboys and all that.”

In the years during and following wartime, The Heights showed adult

movies to survive. However, when the theater screened *I Am Curious (Yellow)* in 1969, an arsonist torched the building in protest of the film's alleged obscenity. “The roof burned off and it was just sitting there with a sloped floor, right there along 19th Street,” says Cabaniss. It forced the theater to close at the time, and the crime remains unsolved.

Decades later, between 1988 and 2015, the theater was used as a gallery space for paintings and sculptures, art openings, and cultural events. It became a performance venue in 2016 and was added to the Register in 2017. The theater's recent renewal project aims to give visitors an idea of how the theater looked after a key renovation in 1935, though with a few modern updates.

Today, the space is quite malleable, capable of hosting up to 700 people without seating for dance-heavy “honky tonk nights” or 500 seated for more intimate performances. Another change

involved making the floor compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), as it was previously too sloped. To preserve the floor, Cabaniss says workers hand-chipped and put aside every little piece of tile out of the floor, opened up the floor itself, took out the concrete, and then poured a floor that was level. They then put the old tiles back in place.

The floor is so special that Houston native and country singer-songwriter Hayes Carll needed a moment with the history when he played The Heights Theater on his 2017 tour. As Cabaniss recalls, “[Carll] wanted to get down there early ... we were still loading the stage in [and] he said, ‘Oh, my God, I just wanted to play on the floor.’”

Cabaniss is glad to keep the theater going, true to the theater's origins as a place for community gathering. The theater has offered touring musicians coming to Houston a chance to play an

intimate venue and, sometimes, a chance to do something a bit different with their sets.

“It’s a tighter environment,” says Cabaniss. “Out of [a band’s] 120 days a year they’re on the road, maybe this is that one-time special that they decided to break it down and go acoustic. Or they may try to do something a little bit different than they would normally do.”

For example, My Morning Jacket’s Jim James performed a stripped-down solo set at the theater in 2018 in support of his soulful solo album *Uniform Distortion*. Robert Earl Keen played a pair of Super Bowl weekend shows in 2017 with some of his friends, including Gary Clark Jr., Leon Bridges, and Kam Franklin of The Suffers.

“Those are the magical moments ... maybe their paths wouldn’t have crossed [without the theater],” says Cabaniss.

One of the biggest lessons he’s learned is to never compromise. After reopening The Heights Theater as a music venue in 2016, Cabaniss says his goal was to provide a quality venue for a variety of musicians to play. The venue has been able to attract bigger acts

thanks to word of mouth from musicians who enjoyed performing there. “[Artists] want a listening environment,” he says. “They want that feedback. They want people to care about their lyrics. And that’s a magical place to be.”

For Cabaniss, that magic comes from history — of the music, architecture, and community.

“I think it’s important to delve into the history,” he says. “It’s part of the narrative. It’s part of the storytelling ... [and] roots music is about storytelling. These performance venues can also have their own narratives.”

The Bend Theatre West Bend, Wisconsin

While driving down Main Street in downtown West Bend, it’s hard to overlook a certain brightly colored sign blade connected to one of the buildings. It’s been a fixture in the area since 1929, and so has the theater within. After sitting empty for 15 years, and much debate about whether to keep part or all of the building, the theater reopened in 2020 — the same year it was added to the

Historic Register — as The Bend Theatre.

“Nobody was ever going to tear down this building as long as that sign was attached to it, and it was still lit,” says Jeff Potts, executive director for Historic West Bend Theatre Inc., the nonprofit that helped renovate and reopen the theater.

Upon entering, it’s immediately clear what a labor of love it took to renovate and restore the theater to its 1920s vaudeville-era look.

“It’s what’s considered a sympathetic restoration, meaning we took it back to what it would look like opening night 1929, with the exceptions of a couple structural improvements,” says Potts. “We flattened part of the floor where it was rigged so that we could add bathrooms and a bar. And at the front of the house, we expanded the stage, so we did lose some seating. But we’re much more functional now as a multipurpose facility.”

Touring vaudeville acts were the main attraction when the theater originally opened its doors, but that year’s stock market crash and Great Depression soon forced a change. The West Bend Theatre became a movie theater and continued to

screen films for the next 80 years.

“The first time we opened up, we instantly had to pivot and reinvent what happened inside these four walls,” says Potts. “While the original intent was that the stage would get used, it was the screen that really became the lifeblood of this building.”

In 2020, as the theater was preparing for its grand reopening, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The date selected just happened to be the same weekend the world started shutting down.

“We reopened on March 14, 2020, with a gala event concert, and then closed the very next day,” Potts says. “When you think about some interesting tidbits about our history, it really is two very different eras, but boy, the unexpected hit both times we opened this theater, and we very quickly had to figure out, ‘Oh shoot, what are we going to do now?’”

The theater, which seats 340 and has a main floor and balcony, once again found a way to keep going. Since resuming operations around Memorial Day 2020, more than 250 events have been booked at The Bend Theatre, including musical performances, movie screenings, and

more. Music performers so far have included Wisconsin singer-songwriter Trapper Schoepp; Whey Jennings (grandson of Waylon); Ferguson, Carbone & Peck; and Chain Station.

Roots music has been especially welcome at The Bend, as the building’s natural acoustics seem to elevate the sound. Potts says the theater’s approach to putting music in the building is to keep things simple. Styles such as bluegrass fit perfectly, he says, “because that’s what this hall was designed to do.”

“The theater was built at a time that amplification wasn’t necessarily at everybody’s disposal, so you had to look at acoustic instruments for performances here,” says Potts. “We’re pretty happy to carry on that tradition by highlighting original artists and artists that just resonate with a wide variety of audiences.”

He enjoys the sense of community on display whenever these artists perform and how readily they’ll point the theater staff to other talented musicians who would be a good fit for their stage.

“We’ve got a really great reputation among musicians, and it’s because it’s a

beautiful house to play in, but it’s also because we treat them like family when they’re here,” says Potts. “I think that’s the cool thing about that whole genre [of roots music], is there’s this unique relationship between the artist and the audience. You just boil it down to the basics and it feels like you’re family and you’ve known everybody for years.”

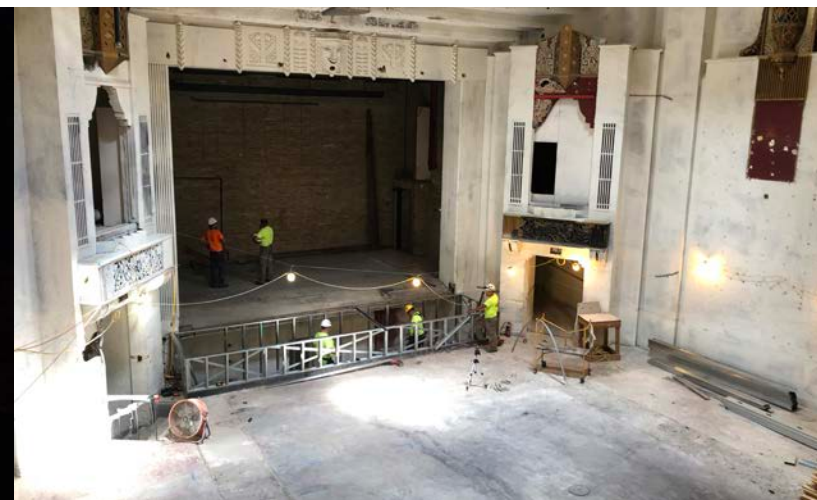
Potts also enjoys seeing artists pay homage to the past. One of his favorite memories is from summer 2021, when Milwaukee-based contemporary bluegrass band Chicken Wire Empire performed a full set tribute to Old & In The Way, the pioneering bluegrass band Jerry Garcia played with in the early ’70s.

“I think there’s this great nostalgia factor here,” says Potts. “People not only are coming back to what in their minds was exclusively a movie theater and now their minds are opened up to a performance venue, but the music itself reminds them of their youth and quite honestly simpler times. If you dig into some of those lyrics, they’re timeless. It holds true today the same as it did ... when those songs were first written and first performed.”

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE BEND THEATRE



The Bend Theatre in West Bend, Wisconsin





MATT LAMBROS

Kings Theatre Brooklyn, New York

Since opening in 1929 in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn, Kings Theatre has aimed to treat visitors and entertainers like royalty. There's majesty at every turn, including gold-laden, elaborately crafted walls. The Loew's company built the theater, which remains the largest in Brooklyn, as one of its five Wonder Theaters around New York City.

The theater initially hosted touring vaudeville shows as well as the occasional film. However, seven weeks after opening, the stock market crashed. Vaudeville waned and the theater shifted to screening films as its main function.

"When it opened, it was a special place in Flatbush. It wasn't your neighborhood movie theater. It was a destination in those days," says Steven Ehrenberg, the theater's director of production. "To bring somebody to go to see something at the Kings was different than going around the corner and seeing it at a closer, more local theater, because the Kings was a grandiose movie palace."

It remained that way until the late '70s, when Loew's closed the doors. Ehrenberg says a combination of changes in the neighborhood and in how movies were distributed led to the decision. It remained empty until 2010, when then-Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz set in motion plans to renovate and restore the theater. With the help of the city, the theater was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2012. The newly renovated theater

reopened in 2015 as a music and entertainment venue.

"Both the architects and the Loew's people felt like everyone who walked in the door should feel like royalty," says Ehrenberg.

The goal of the renovation project, he says, was to get Kings Theatre to look as much as possible as it did the day it originally opened. That included using the right colors in its decor. To recreate the original colors, the renovation team had to scrape away layers of paint on the walls until they found the original materials and then had to do an examination and chemical sampling to determine what the colors were when new.

Historical documents and photographs also helped them see the theater's original look, filling in the gaps from missing pieces, such as light fixtures and the brass tops of stair railings. An added challenge to the renovators was repairing water damage caused by a leak in the theater's original roof.

"The plaster ceilings are very ornate, and a lot of those had quite a bit of damage from water because water and plaster do not play well together," says Ehrenberg. "Some of the plaster ornamentation on one whole side of the theater was much worse than the other side, but much of the decorative layers had pretty much fallen down and melted away. The restoration of that is a painstaking process."

The renovation added modern touches, including technology that controls video, audio, and lighting. The

technical ability to connect speakers to amps and a specially designed new sound system, among other additions, helps the theater put on a variety of concerts and shows today.

"We still do theater, though it seems that concerts are more of our bread and butter to a certain extent," Ehrenberg says.

Many of the shows are family- and kid-friendly, he says, and flexible seating gives the venue the ability to book more energetic concerts for adults as well; seats in front of the stage can be removed "to give us a nice-size general admission pit area," Ehrenberg says.

Kings Theatre sounds great, he says, because of its shape. Thanks to the theater's design, which features a lower orchestra level and upper mezzanine, musicians don't have to overamplify their music to reach everyone. And just as the design of the room aids in the sound quality, it also gives audience members great sight lines of the stage and performers.

Some of the more rootsy artists who have played the theater include Bob Weir, The Avett Brothers, and Father John Misty. But one of Ehrenberg's favorite memories at the theater is when John Prine played in 2016.

"When John started sound check, I was out in the auditorium, and I called my brother up," he recalls. "I [held up] my phone ... and let him listen for a little while through a sound check song or two, and just put the phone back on my ear and said, 'You should have come.' And then the next time John Prine came, he came and had a great evening." ■

MATT LAMBROS

COURTESY OF KINGS THEATRE

