

## JazzBeat Magazine

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The San Jacinto Mystique by Paige Van Vorst

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With this issue we present the last recording done in San Jacinto Hall. I recall meeting a jazz fan back in the 60's bragging about his record collection- "Yeah, I've got records from all the Halls in New Orleans- Preservation Hall, Dixieland Hall, San Jacinto Hall." As if one could have ever walked into San Jacinto Hall during those days and paid to hear New Orleans jazz.

San Jacinto Hall received a great reputation based on a few weeks of activity in 1944. As usual, the protagonist was Bill Russell. In the 1940's New Orleans was not brimming with recording studios, and the few studios there were interested in recording black musicians. When Russell and friends first recorded Bunk Johnson, they used a piano warehouse at Grunewald Music.

When Russell returned in July 1944 to record Bunk for American Music he decided to use one of the old dance halls then dotting New Orleans; older neighborhoods. He rented San Jacinto Hall, 1422 Dumaine St, for \$10 a night.

The building was owned by [Edwin Joseph] "Beansie" Fauria, one of New Orleans all-time great characters. Fauria was the Numbers King of the South and had extensive real estate holdings, mostly bars and dance halls, as well as ownership of most of the slot machines in New Orleans. He was of mixed race and very light, like his relative, Afro-Italian trumpeter Ernie Cagnolatti. As Preston Jackson said, "The police would pick him up for questioning and they'd ask him if he was colored or white. He wouldn't answer. He'd say, 'I'm Beansie'."

Fauria had owned the Astoria, well remembered as the home of the splendid Jones and Collins Astoria Hot Eight in the late 20's, and he was still around in the seventies as owner (in partnership with Larry Borenstein) of Vaucresson's, a Bourbon Street restaurant which featured music by Yoshio and Keiko Toyama, Orange Kellin and Lars Edegran, back when they were virtual unknowns working for tips. Upstairs was an apartment used as a New Orleans headquarters by no less than three record label owners: George Buck (of GHB), Leonard Brackett (of Center) and Sonny Faggart (Pearl).

Beansie actually made an appearance at one of Russell's recording sessions and sent for a case of beer for the band.

The Hall was built during the 1920's and was named for the Battle of San Jacinto, an 1836 outburst that ended Mexico's attempts to conquer the Republic of Texas. Locally, the hall was usually referred to as San Jacintas. It had been rented to local organizations to house dances ever

since it opened. There were apartments upstairs, and Russell always had to worry that someone up there would play his radio too loud and spoil a recording, but apparently the neighbors didn't intrude.

He got just what he wanted from the building, a resilient sound that became the hallmark for New Orleans recordings.

Russell never used the Hall again. When he returned in 1945 he couldn't get the dates he wanted and they'd begun to operate the bar in the evening and there was the likelihood of having to shush the neighborhood drunks. Russell used Artisan's Hall (usually pronounced Artesian Hall) for his Wooden Joe session but otherwise did most of his recording at the musicians' homes. I always think about Wooden Joe's band whenever I drink well water.

Subsequent recording projects used Russell's 1944 sessions as the ideal.

Decca used Artisan's Hall in 1952 for a George Lewis session, and when Riverside recorded the Living Legends series in 1961 they used Jeunes Amis Hall, another wooden dancehall. Hope Hall in Algiers was also used occasionally, by both Barry Martyn and Leonard Brackett, despite a fairly bad echo.

San Jacinto Hall returned to prominence with the recording sessions produced by Thomas Bethell. A native of England, Bethell was teaching at a private school in Virginia when he decided to try his hand at recording. He issued four LPS on the San Jacinto label, recorded in the early 1960's. The hall was in fairly poor shape by this time. Known then as the Five-Four Club, it featured rhythm and blues when there was music, and the upstairs apartments were pretty run down.

The four LPS Bethell produced were well received, particularly the first two, which featured some of the best George Lewis playing of that period. The first two San Jacinto LPS were recently reissued on GHB, and this time we are issuing the last session recorded at San Jacinto Hall, a previously-unissued 1966 date featuring Kid Thomas and Jim Robinson with Sammy Rimington.

There was at least one more recording done- when Japan's New Orleans Rascals toured the US in the summer of 1966 they broke into the building, which had been purchased by the City and was awaiting demolition as part of an urban renewal project, and recorded one track just for the experience of it.

San Jacinto Hall burned down on January 9, 1967. Though the building has been gone for 35 years, its sound lives on in the recordings made by Russell and Bethell.