

Milton Morris

Nightclub Owner
1911-1983

by David Conrads

Nightclub owner, raconteur, and aspirant to political office, Milton Morris was one of the great champions of Kansas City jazz. His storytelling skills, wisecracks and foot-long cigars also secured his reputation as one of the city's most colorful characters. Operating his first nightclub during the Pendergast years, he was a member of the generation of Kansas City nightclub owners who came after Felix Payne. He befriended and provided work for countless local musicians and helped launch the careers of several international jazz stars, most notably Count Basie, with whom he maintained a life-long friendship. Decades after the heyday of Kansas City jazz, Morris ran a bar that kept the music and spirit of that legendary period alive as a haven for jazz aficionados.



Milton Morris was born in Kansas City, one of six children, and raised in an orphanage after his father abandoned the family. He sold newspapers as a child and later attended Manual High School and Whittier Business College. By the time he was 18, he owned a drugstore at 26th and Troost called the Rendezvous. Here he circumvented Prohibition laws by selling "prescription" alcohol. When liquor was legalized, Morris opened a succession of nightclubs, including the Hey Hay Club, the Novelty Club and the Latin Quarter.

In 1934, Morris opened Milton's, at Troost and Armour Boulevard. Milton's became a Mecca for jazz fans. Samuel "Baby" Lovett and Julia Lee performed there regularly for years. Pee Wee Hunt paid tribute to the popular club in his recording "Meet Me at Milton's." Morris closed Milton's in 1950 and the next year opened Milton's Tap Room, at 32nd and Main. In place of live jazz, Morris entertained patrons with music from his legendary collection of some five thousand records, first on a 50-disk jukebox, and later on a state-of-the-art sound system.

In his later years, Morris used his notoriety to try to launch a

political career. In five whimsical—and unsuccessful—runs for governor of Missouri, he campaigned on a platform that included legalized casino gambling, horse racing and a 4 a.m. closing time for cabarets.

Sources

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