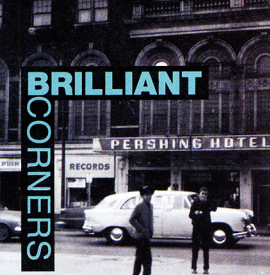


BRILLIANT

CORNERS



Jazzwise staggers down memory lane, delves into dark corners and revisits the shrines that pepper the history of the music.

**THIS MONTH ::
THE PERSHING HOTEL,
CHICAGO.
STORY AND PHOTO ::
MICHAEL JACKSON**



The heyday of Chicago's Pershing Hotel was during the 1930s, 40s and 50s. A 1944 article in *Time* magazine tells of the hotel, then used to house soldiers, boasting "a cocktail lounge on which \$30,000 was spent". Aside

from residential, the building housed the 2,000-capacity ballroom and the street level Lounge where Ahmad Jamal waxed 'Poinciana', the first jazz hit for Chess records. The basement Beige Room presented cabaret and chorus girls, but jazz impresario Joe Segal remembers hearing Sun Ra there, and Charlie Parker.

"The room was for dancing but in the early days of bebop, the audience didn't know what to do. Bird played a set one night, after which people felt they should applaud. Bird took a break, saying 'next set we're playing dance music'. He came back and played the same, but people danced!"

Segal booked Lester Young at the Pershing in the late-50s, alongside Jodie Christian and Bob Cranshaw. He approached the hotel one time and felt powerful overtones from Dizzy Gillespie's big band. "There is a wire recording of that concert somewhere. James Moody, Ernie Henry and Dave Burns were in the band," Segal recalls, adding that the white grand piano in the ballroom had a terrible reputation, "Most pianists laid out when it came to the piano solo."

Situated on East 64th street near Cottage Grove, the Pershing was part of one of the most exciting jazz neighbourhoods of all time, on Chicago's Southside, which encompassed the Savoy Ballroom and Regal theatre among the larger venues, as well as the

upmarket Trianon Ballroom and White City Amusement Park Ballroom, which catered to a white clientele. The Pershing attracted a black crowd spurred by bookers McKee Fitzhugh and Al Benson, who later sponsored

Muddy Waters and Sam Cooke. Saxophone veteran Von Freeman, who along with brothers Bruz and George, backed everyone from Roy Eldridge to Billie Holiday, played a 1950 Parker date at the Pershing. Freeman remembers his first gig with Captain Walter Dyett's Du Sable-ites featuring pianist Dorothy Donegan, in the Beige room and the hit stage show *The Smart Affair*, with Johnny Hartman. In the swing era Segal

would leave his wife jitterbugging on the dance floor to go up front and check the band. When bebop came in dancers cut the tempo in half "otherwise you might break your neck," recalls Freeman.

Roughly coinciding with Parker's death in 1955, the seductive scene around the Pershing waned. Segal says they attempted to rename the place Birdland, which was, out of legal necessity, corrupted to Budland; the ballroom was eventually given the now unlikely title Club Bagdad and the Beige Room became El Grotto cafe. The Pershing was demolished in 1964, and it took a feisty old 65th street record store proprietor and still active musician, "Johnny Twist," to point out to me its exact location – an abandoned lot in a depressed neighbourhood. Across Cottage Grove however is an awning for a new Grand Ballroom, in a building whose brickwork mimics the arched windows of the Pershing, and the glories of yore.

