

See You *at the* **MUSIC BOX** *By Clark Harder*



Tail fins riding high and chrome bumpers gleaming bright, the cars began lining up along M-55 and M-18 at twilight. The weekly pilgrimage to "The Box" had begun. Up to 5,000 young people typically gathered at the Music Box on Friday and Saturday nights during the late 1950s and '60s, with the record crowd reaching 7,200 on July 4, 1967.

**But what were these teenagers up to?
Why, dancing, of course.**

THE BOX'S BEGINNING

Lee Kelly first came up with the idea for the Music Box while serving in the Army Air Corps during World War II. Surprisingly, his imagination was captured not by the USO dance halls of England, but by young people dancing on a street corner in the Philippines near the war's end. Lee—who flew more than 40 bombing missions—was called upon to shuttle a high ranking general to a meeting on the island nation. Given leave for a day, Lee wandered the streets and found the teenagers grouped around a wind-up record player on the corner. When he talked with

them, they told him it was all they had for entertainment in their town, where even schools were often closed. Kelly thought a similar environment would be a perfect way to entertain young people of northern Michigan, where opportunities for social interaction were also few.

Lee, a native of Detroit, immediately wrote home to his wife Shirley (nee Verinder) and told her about his idea for a business for when he returned from the war. Shirley had grown up in Houghton Lake, and as it happened, the Kellys owned land strategically located near the intersection of state highways M-55 and M-18 (US-27 in those days) at Prudenville

on the southeast corner of Houghton Lake. In the 1940s, the couple built a small open-air dance pavilion on this spot and opened the Music Box for business on July 4, 1946.

In the first season, the property didn't have its own power source, so the Kellys strung an electrical cord to the neighboring Sinclair gas station to power their jukebox full of 78-rpm dance records. The teens who came could punch in their favorite dance tunes on the machine as many times as they wished for the evening. The concept quickly caught on with the local teenagers, and the Music Box was off and running.

MAJOR EXPANSIONS

In the beginning, things were simple: a cement slab in the wooded setting, and the jukebox in a small building. Within three years, however, a basic sound system replaced the jukebox and the cement dance slab was enlarged. A partial wall and fence were built, and admission to the grounds was a nickel to help defray the cost of records.

Lee, who maintained the grounds and equipment, commuted on weekends from his jobs downstate, where he worked at the *Detroit News* and as a teacher for the emotionally impaired at the Pontiac State Hospital. He monitored the dance floor, and Shirley would spin the records—most of which were 45s by the early to mid-1950s. The local youth from Houghton Lake and then nearby West Branch, Roscommon, Grayling, Harrison, St. Helen and Lake City soon began flocking to the Box, so it wasn't long before the business expanded with an indoor snack bar and restrooms. Soon, the locals begged them to keep the hall open on winter weekends, and Lee added a "winter room."

The entire facility was enclosed by a high cement block wall, painted white, and thus began the mystique of the Box. Who knew what treasures and opportunities for romance lurked within the walls of the compound? The only way to find out was to attend the weekly dances that began at dusk and lasted until

1 a.m. When Michigan went to daylight savings time, the start was pushed back from 9 to 9:30 p.m. On weekends, and especially on holidays, the teens came from many miles to join in the night of dancing, often camping or sharing a rental cottage for the weekend. Shirley, known to the youth as "the blonde in the tower," played the records from a tower that had been built in 1955 to house the three turntables and provide her with a view of the entire dance floor. She often opened the night with Bobby Freeman's 1958 hit "Do You Want To Dance?" or, by the mid-1960s, "Let's Dance" by Chris Montez.

The Music Box was a hot spot, but certainly not a hangout. The Kellys insisted on a no liquor policy and a strict dress code that forbade even shorts above the knee despite the setting in a resort community. The policy was strongly enforced by bouncers who were generally young college students armed with silver flashlights. Patrons who showed up acting out of control were likely to have their breath sniffed at the door before being admitted. If they didn't pass the sniff



Above: Lee and Shirley in 1946. Opposite page: A crowd gathers to dance in 1965. Next page: The Music Box in 1968.

test, they didn't dance at the Box.

Despite its strict policies, the Music Box brought out large crowds. In those days, most of which were prior to completion of I-75 into northern Michigan, US-27 and M-18 were the primary routes to Prudenville. As gas was cheap and cruising was a common weekend pastime, it wasn't unusual for the highways to be bumper to bumper with

Long-time Music Box Employee Relives Glory Days

As word of The Music Box spread and crowds grew in the 1960s, Lee Kelly realized he would need to hire help to run the operation on weekend nights. And on July 4, 1962, he enlisted Mark Barnhart, one of the Box's regulars, to help.

"I was in line waiting to buy my ticket when Mr. Kelly came down the line and when he saw me he pointed and said 'you' and I thought I was in trouble," Mark said. But Lee wasn't reprimanding Mark—he was asking him for a favor:

"Lee told me, 'We're going to have a big crowd tonight and I'm short-handed. I know you've been coming here a long time and I've never had any trouble with you. You know the rules, will you help me out and work for me just for this one night?' I replied that I'd help out but only for the night, I didn't really want to work. I was there to dance and meet girls!"

But after that first night, working the dance floor was in young Mark's blood. Mark worked steadily as a bouncer at first, and then later helped with the sound system. He would even buy records when he was downstate in Saginaw, Flint, and Detroit.

Mark was one of about 80 employees through the years, but his friendship with the Kellys extended into his adult years as well. Not only did he help Lee after he reopened the Music Box in 1999, but today, lives in the house Lee built after he retired. Mark bought the house at Houghton Lake for his own retirement home a few years ago, and still maintains some of the audio equipment and has catalogued the record collection (approximately 5,000 records—mostly 45s, but with some 1940s 78-rpm records mixed in.)

A room in Mark's basement replicates the old Music Box, right down to a small portion of the dance floor that had been in the hall from 1965 to its demolition in 2004. The walls, white-painted cement block, just like the Box hold some of the original colored lights and several signs that appeared in parts of the building cover the walls. Lee's original Music Box hat and a miniature replica of his 1956 Ford Thunderbird, complete with the Music Box crest on the driver's door, can be found in Mark's shrine to the dance palace.

cars heading for the Box on Friday and Saturday nights.

AN ERA COMES TO AN END

The attraction of the Music Box continued for more than 35 years. But then, as quickly as it had arrived on the scene in 1946, the hall was suddenly quiet. The doors closed and, seemingly overnight, the business went dark. Although the building and grounds were immaculately kept, the Music Box stood for more than a decade with little activity.

As much as Lee and Shirley loved all the young people who frequented their establishment through the years—they often “adopted” local youngsters and offered them support and advice—the two were equally dedicated to each other. After 35 years of countless nights in the unheated control tower, Shirley had severe arthritis, so advanced, in fact, that she could no longer climb the steps to the tower. One day, Lee found her trying to crawl up the steps to play the records, and he decided to shut down the operations.

Lee devoted more than 10 years to Shirley’s daily care as her health declined. While he didn’t reopen the dance

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The Closing Set of Songs

The Music Box was known for keeping teenagers hopping on the dance floor, but when the final 15 to 20 minutes arrived before closing time, Shirley Kelly would queue up the closing set which almost always consisted of the following seven slow songs.

- “Till Then” - The Classics (1963)
- “Have A Good Time” - Sue Thompson (1962)
- “Goodnight Sweetheart” - The Spaniels (1954)/The Four Preps (1962)
- “Goodnight My Love” - Ray Peterson (1959)
- “Bon Voyage” - Janice Harper (1957)
- “Auf Wiederseh’n Sweetheart” - Vera Lynn (1952)
- “The Little Music Box” - Skeeter Davis (1959)
- “God Bless America” - Kate Smith (1938)/Connie Francis (1959)

venue during this time, he also didn’t sell the facility either. After Shirley’s death in 1996, friends and fans finally convinced Lee to reopen the hall on weekend nights in 1999. Once again, the Music Box held Friday and Saturday night dances—this time, Fridays were nostalgia nights dedicated to the adults who had danced there in their youth, and Saturdays were reserved for the 16- to 21-year-olds. But, it just wasn’t the same. After a three-year run, Lee again decided to shut down the Music Box, this time putting it up for sale.

But Lee was adamant that he would not sell the hall to anyone who would ever obtain a liquor license or run it as a bar. He simply did not want the Box to slip into ownership that might sully its long held reputation as a safe place for young people to gather. Finally, real estate agents advised him that he could likely sell the land for more money if the building wasn’t on it. And so, Lee made the decision to tear down the Music Box.

By 2004—after an auction selling most of the furnishings, audio equipment, and even parts of the building—the Music Box was no more.

In declining health, Lee contacted and obtained a pledge from friend and former employee Mark Barnhart (see sidebar), who agreed to renew Lee’s business license when it expired after his death. While Lee died in April 2010, thanks to this agreement, no one will be opening a bar using the name “The Music Box.”

Clark Harder, of Owosso, MI, is a former Michigan State Representative, serving from 1991–1998. He has considered Houghton Lake his second home since his youth. He holds a Bachelors degree in Journalism from Michigan State University, and worked previously in broadcasting and has written for print, television, and radio. This is his first submission to the Chronicle. He thanks Sue Jentoft Martens for her editing talents. ■

