

# The Surf Ballroom: Rock & Roll, 1950s Nostalgia, and Cultural Memory in Clear Lake

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“It reminds me of the musical *Brigadoon*, about the village that magically comes back every 100 years. Every year, the Surf Ballroom, this time of year, is magic, too.”<sup>1</sup>

– Winter Dance Party attendee Michael Burrage

IN THE HISTORY OF ROCK ‘N’ ROLL, no date has been more enshrined in twentieth-century musical memory than that of February 3, 1959. On that frigid night, a plane carrying three young, up-and-coming performers – Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J.P. “The Big Bopper” Richardson – crashed into an Iowa cornfield shortly after takeoff. They, along with local pilot Roger Peterson, died on impact after the young musicians had spent the evening entertaining an enthusiastic audience of young people at the Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, Iowa.

That tragic event contributes mightily to the Surf Ballroom’s enduring appeal. Yet the entertainment venue has a rich musical history apart from that event. The Surf serves as an iconic representation of Iowa’s popular culture, particularly as it relates to the history of music and the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll. However, this essay also traces the multifaceted history of Clear Lake and its long association with tourism, which began during the Progressive Era. That history illuminates such topics as boosterism,

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1. Deb Nicklay, “A Collection of Memorable Quotes from 2012,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 12/30/2012.

the emergence of a distinct youth culture, and even the struggle for civil rights. I also examine the Surf's construction during the Great Depression and its evolution during the 1930s and 1940s as it became an important venue for popular culture and community engagement in northern Iowa, especially during World War II. Ballrooms once fulfilled an important social function in small towns across the Midwest, providing myriad opportunities for exposure to diverse forms of entertainment far outside the conventionally prescribed norms of the midwestern small town.

Yet the Surf's existence today does indeed owe a great deal to the events of 1959. In the second half of the essay, I chronicle what happened to the Surf after the Winter Dance Party and that tragic plane crash. The key to the Surf's still salient appeal is the desire for an authentic link to the past, coupled with a macabre fascination that surrounds dark tourism. The recent recognition that this venue enjoys has been driven by a variety of outsiders, especially musicians, journalists, and music fans. Civic leaders were initially slow to recognize the Winter Dance Party's legacy, but more recently community-led efforts in the arenas of historic preservation and tourism infrastructure have been an important tool for maintaining cultural memory at the Surf and throughout Clear Lake.

The Surf Ballroom has become a locus for the nation's collective musical memory, simultaneously demonstrating the cultural power of the 1950s and the still fervent nostalgia for that decade. As the ballroom seeks out younger audiences with no living memories of Buddy Holly or poodle skirts, cultural memory will become critically important for maintaining the venue's relevance in the years to come.

### **"The Saratoga of the West"**

Clear Lake's history as a vacation destination stretches back to the late nineteenth century. It was billed for several decades as "The Saratoga of the West" because of the many hotels that hosted middle- and upper-class visitors. Early images accompanied by booster rhetoric emphasized the natural beauty of the lake as well as the opportunity for refuge and respite from the drudgery and difficulties of urban life. As early as 1900, the ladies of the



A 1908 postcard captioned "Bathing Scene – Oakwood Park, Clear Lake" captures Clear Lake's already established reputation as a destination for recreation, relaxation, and natural beauty. Courtesy Clear Lake Public Library.

Clear Lake Library Association issued a souvenir edition of the daily newspaper, the *Clear Lake Mirror*, that outlined the early history of the area and engaged in a bit of community boosterism. Local resident Mary Emsley wrote the following bit of poetic prose in describing her hometown:

If joys unbounded, if dreamy life in a dreamy land of blissful laziness is what is wanted as a rest from the whirl of business and the noise of cities, then Clear Lake is a place of refuge where care is flung to winds that fill flapping sails and ruffle peaceful waters, and where you shall be soothed always by lap, lap, of the waves upon the shore.

Another brochure from 1911 was a bit more specific in its description of the lake and its seemingly untouched surroundings, thus helping to create an image of a community bound tightly to its greatest natural resource. Here, the author emphasizes the minimal development around the lake:

Clear Lake has become immensely popular as a summer resort, and justly deserves the appellation so often applied to it by eastern parties, "The Saratoga of the West." The lake is an attractive body of water, clear as crystal, having an area of about 4,000 acres, seven

miles in length and two miles in width. Its shores are covered with beautiful groves of native oak, walnut, elm and maple trees, planted in the most picturesque order of that grandest of landscape architects—Nature.

This same bit of promotional literature characterized the population of the town in north central Iowa as “2,000 wide-awake, enterprising, culture-loving people, eager for every forward movement.” Thus, at the dawn of the twentieth century the community’s civic leaders struck a “devil’s bargain” with tourism, but they were also eager to embrace the ideals of the Progressive Era and, as so many other small towns across the Midwest did, they fancied their town the next Chicago.<sup>2</sup>

The lake was the community’s greatest asset, but the formation and organization of the Clear Lake Chautauqua brought thousands. It mirrored in many ways the original Chautauqua, formed in 1874 on the banks of Lake Chautauqua in New York. In 1876 a group of prominent Methodists brought the event west to Clear Lake. A pavilion and campground built along the lakeshore served as the gathering point for meetings and speakers. By 1900, the Chautauqua became a well-known institution across the state and the nation. Visitors would descend on the town for three weeks in the heat of summer to participate in an event that historians have seen as emblematic of a Progressive Era that valued intellectualism and edification.<sup>3</sup> One brochure published in 1911 to promote Clear Lake’s Chautauqua emphasized these progressive ideals: “The Chautauqua has as its fundamental purpose, the ambition of making people think,—think about politics, about religion, about books, about men and women. And such thinking breeds independence in all lines of endeavor. This is the great aim and purpose of the Clear Lake Chautauqua,—to furnish to all its supporters and visitors a means of enjoyment and improvement.”<sup>4</sup>

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2. Mary A. Emsley, “Clear Lake as a Summer Resort,” *Clear Lake Mirror*, 3/29/1900, newspaper clipping in Joanne Watkins Scrapbook, ca. 1890–2009, privately held by Ms. Watkins, Clear Lake, Iowa; “Clear Lake Chautauqua, held July 22–31, 1911” (Clear Lake, IA, 1911), in Joanne Watkins Scrapbook.

3. Pete Conroy, “Clear Lake Chautauqua Once Highlight of Summer Season: Famous Persons Heard During 18 Years of Existence,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 8/12/1943.

4. “Clear Lake Chautauqua, held July 22–31, 1911.”



*Orator and politician William Jennings Bryan (and associates) visited Clear Lake in 1908 for the Chautauqua. Courtesy Clear Lake Public Library.*

A wide range of well-known figures, including temperance firebrand Carrie Nation and orators such as Booker T. Washington and William Jennings Bryan, made their way to Clear Lake for the summer chautauquas. The Clear Lake Chautauqua only lasted until 1914, its demise hastened by many other competing summer attractions in and around the area. But it helped create the tourist trade, contributing to the community's thriving reputation as a summer vacation spot.<sup>5</sup>

In 1910 construction began on the White Pier, which soon served as northern Iowa's largest dance hall. Patrons could also take in a movie or go roller skating. Many other summer venues competed for the tourist's dollar, including Bayside Amusement Park, the Oaks Hotel, Petersen's Bath House, and a range of lakeside resorts and campgrounds. Moreover, at the dawn of the twentieth century, Clear Lake and the neighboring community

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5. Beth Ann Herker Schumacher, "From Camp Meetings to Memories: The Story of the Clear Lake Chautauqua" (master's thesis, University of Northern Iowa, 1985), viii, 69-70.

of Mason City jointly constructed an interurban, an electric railway that carried visitors and residents between the two towns on a daily basis. In short, for a town of its size (the population stood at 2,014 in 1910 and steadily grew by 1,000 over the next two decades), Clear Lake possessed a significant tourism infrastructure that made it one of the most desirable vacation destinations in the upper Midwest.<sup>6</sup>

That set the stage for Carl Fox to successfully establish the Surf Ballroom. Born in 1895, Fox was an Iowa farm kid with big dreams. While serving abroad during World War I, his entrepreneurial ambitions began to take shape. After the war, he and his wife, Emma, opened a few seasonal roller skating rinks across the upper Midwest. Clear Lake was among those communities, but Fox saw the potential for something more there.<sup>7</sup> He decided to build a dance hall on the north shore of the lake. The White Pier had been destroyed by a tornado in 1931, and another dance hall, the Tom-Tom, had burned down in 1932, creating a business opportunity for Fox despite the dark economic climate throughout the nation.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Surf Opens for Business**

Construction began on the first Surf Ballroom in January 1933 with a budget of \$25,000. Fox envisioned a dance hall that resembled an ocean beach club, perhaps drawing inspiration from the lake. The interior featured floating clouds and brightly colored palm trees on the walls. The exterior was of Art Deco design, and the local newspapers remarked on the Surf's Lamella roof (the only one in the entire state), a vaulted style that became popular in America between the world wars. It was patented by Friedrich Zollinger in 1921 and first used in Germany. The gothic-inspired style caught on in the United States, and a number of American architects adapted the Lamella roof for industrial uses, especially for aircraft hangars in the 1930s. The interior had "floor space of

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6. Marianne Morf, *Clear Lake, Iowa, 1851–2006* (Mason City, 2006), 12.

7. "Carl J. Fox," Fuchs Family, <http://fuchs-foxfamily.blogspot.com/2007/08/carl-j-fox.html>.

8. "Petersen Starts Work on New Lakeside Dance Hall," *Clear Lake Reporter*, 1/26/1933.



*The Surf Ballroom's Art Deco style architecture reflected the trend toward the new and modern in contrast to the Victorian-style dance halls of the early twentieth century. Courtesy Clear Lake Public Library.*

8,000 square feet, accommodating 500 couples easily," and was made entirely of maple, "laid in such a way that the dancers will always be going with the grain of the wood." The Surf also featured state-of-the-art ventilation and heating innovations for its time. It opened in April 1933 with Wally Erickson's Marigold Orchestra of Minneapolis entertaining the opening night crowd.<sup>9</sup>

Across America in the 1930s, small towns began to modernize through their architecture, infrastructure, and business development. The original Surf's architecture reflected this new modernism with a streamlined, contemporary look very different from the Victorian-style bathhouses and hotels that had dotted the town at the dawn of the twentieth century. The Surf's visual appeal in

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9. Michael Dickson and Dave Parker, *Sustainable Timber Design* (New York, 2015), 81; "New Lakeside Ballroom Opens with Dance Monday," *Clear Lake Reporter*, 4/13/1933.



*This photograph of the Surf's ballroom from the 1930s shows off both the venue's Lamella roof, a vaulted style that was very popular in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and its dance floor made entirely from maple, an attribute that Carl Fox promoted to prospective dancers at the Surf. Courtesy Clear Lake Public Library.*

its architecture, interior design, and up-to-date amenities reflected this nationwide desire for the new and novel, despite the deprivations of the Great Depression.<sup>10</sup>

Ballrooms and dance halls were ubiquitous in Iowa, with at least 72 scattered throughout the state in the 1930s and 1940s. From the Val-Air in Des Moines to venues in much smaller communities, such as the Riviera in Janesville or Matter's Ballroom in Decorah, such spaces offered important opportunities for young people to gather, especially in the summer months. Amateur historian Myron Kelleher observed of his own participation in small-town dance hall culture, "Kids listened to rock 'n' roll on the radio and their records, and on weekends could actually go see their favorites in person for a couple of bucks. Sometimes the ballrooms would be so crowded you couldn't get inside.

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10. Miles Orvell, *The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), 101.



I remember nights when Decorah's Matter's Ballroom had 1,500 or 1,600 teenagers show up."<sup>11</sup>

The Surf – and the White Pier before it – succeeded for decades because of the embrace of a new public dance culture that catered to youth and tolerated the intermingling of the sexes.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, despite Clear Lake's rich history as a religious tourism destination, by the 1930s it seems that there was very little pushback from any moralists or clergy in the community. On the contrary, when the Surf opened for business in April 1933, the reaction seemed wholly enthusiastic. Businesses ranging from ice harvesters to hardware stores placed advertisements in the local paper congratulating Carl Fox and wishing him success.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s the Surf often featured urbane, sophisticated musical acts, including top swing bands from Kay Kyser to the Dorsey Brothers. As David Stowe argues, "Swing was the preeminent musical expression of the New Deal: a cultural form of 'the people,' accessible, inclusive, distinctively democratic, and thus distinctively American." To its legions of fans in the 1930s, Stowe notes, "Swing was both proof and cause of an American society growing ever more egalitarian and progressive." At the height of the genre's popularity, Fox booked the "King of Swing," 28-year-old Benny Goodman, who appeared at the Surf on September 24, 1937. Earlier that year Goodman had played at the Paramount theater in New York City to highly enthusiastic crowds made up mostly of a newly defined group, teenagers.<sup>14</sup>

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11. Melody Parker, "Local Dance Enthusiast Shares His Passion for Iowa Ballrooms," *Waterloo Courier*, 2/6/2005.

12. As Joan Jensen has argued in her study of dance halls in Wisconsin, "Dancing is one way to transcend place and space." While much of Jensen's work (and that of other historians as well) focuses on urban dance halls, her observations related to social and spatial mobility, courtship, and sexual mores certainly apply to the Surf as well as to the commercial dance halls that preceded it in Clear Lake. Joan B. Jensen, "I'd Rather Be Dancing: Wisconsin Women Moving On," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 22 (2001), 1-20. See also Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986, 90-91).

13. *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 4/14/1933 (advertisements on pp. 10-11).

14. David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge, 1994), 13; "Air Ya Listenin? Goodman on Air from Surf Friday," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 9/23/1937.

Music held a new form of power for teenagers in the 1930s. As Kelly Shrum observes, “Music provided an important popular outlet—a forum for group activity, a background for dancing, and a way to express feelings within the realm of popular culture—that could not be suppressed.”<sup>15</sup> Because of the proliferation of commercial dance halls like the Surf, music became much more integrated into the daily lives of young people. And if attending concerts at a nearby dance hall was not possible, there was always the even more ubiquitous radio. Throughout the 1930s many of the Surf’s performances were broadcast over the local radio station, KGLO, usually airing Saturday nights from 10:05 to 10:30.<sup>16</sup>

Among the many entertainers who appeared at the Surf, prominent performers included several African Americans, offering a glimpse of a more diverse nation outside the confines of small-town Iowa. On July 21, 1935, for example, African American bandleader Cab Calloway, along with the Cotton Club Orchestra, performed at the Surf long after he had established a firm reputation as a charismatic singer in the clubs of Chicago and New York City. Other bands led by notable African Americans during this same period included Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Andy Kirk and His 12 Clouds of Joy.<sup>17</sup> In 1937 a piece in the *Mason City Globe-Gazette* struck a rather poetic tone about the Surf’s place in the community and its important role in bringing a bit of culture to northern Iowa. “Proud are the lake residents to claim the city in which the Surf ballroom, the melting pot of mid-west dancers, is located. Posed on the shore in a manner comparable to any cosmopolitan amusement, the waves of Clear Lake lap the beach in rhythmic harmony with the tuneful strains of continental orchestras.”<sup>18</sup>

The world of swing music was more progressive in its stance on integration and racial equality than other facets of the entertainment field. As early as 1936 Benny Goodman began to hire

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15. Kelly Shrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls’ Culture, 1920–1945* (New York, 2004), 107.

16. “Surf Bands Over KGLO Are Named,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 6/26/1937.

17. Advertisements for these various bands appeared in the *Clear Lake Mirror Reporter* and *Mason City Globe-Gazette* from 1935 to 1937.

18. “Northern Iowa’s Most Popular Ballroom Now Completed,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 7/1/1937.

black entertainers as guest performers or stand-alone trio or quartet “units,” although the full band remained all white until 1939. That year, Goodman hired pianist Fletcher Henderson and guitarist Charlie Christian for the big band. Three years later, Goodman offered three African Americans—a trumpeter, a drummer, and a bassist—spots in his band. Furthermore, Goodman traveled throughout the South, staying with his band in many of the top hotels. If bookers in the South objected to the band’s black performers, Goodman wouldn’t take the date. Musician Lionel Hampton (who played the Surf frequently throughout the 1950s) noted, “Benny wouldn’t back down. He once bopped a guy in the head with his clarinet when the guy told him he should ‘get those niggers off his show.’” As Goodman stated, “I am selling music, not prejudice.” Indeed, when Goodman played at the Surf in September 1937, the press notice in the *Mason City Globe-Gazette* made special mention of Hampton and African American pianist Teddy Wilson, who both joined Goodman at the Surf for the performance.<sup>19</sup>

Carl Fox’s abilities as a shrewd promoter and manager enabled him to recruit such high-caliber, well-known talent as Goodman for the Surf. He built two other ballrooms—the Terp in Austin, Minnesota, and the Prom in St. Paul—and made sure that the bands would have at least a trio of venues to play in the region. Fox, like most concert venue owners of the period, worked through booking agencies such as the Music Corporation of America, the General Artists Corporation, and William Morris, who handled the itineraries of the bands and supplied local newspapers with press releases and other forms of publicity. It is uncertain how much bandleaders like Goodman, Calloway, or Kirk commanded in fees from small-town venues like the Surf, but big band tours usually operated on razor-thin margins because of the high overhead costs. And those at the very top kept up a grueling pace. For example, in 1940, Iowa native Glenn Miller, considered the number one bandleader in the country, grossed \$630,000, equivalent to \$11.2 million in 2018. The band’s schedule that year included 52 weeks of radio programs sponsored by the Chesterfield Cigarette Company, 25 weeks of hotel

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19. Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago, 1998), 128–29; “Air Ya Listenin?”

engagements, 16 weeks of one-night engagements around the country, 10 weeks of theater shows, and two record dates per month for RCA Victor. Moreover, Miller and many other prominent bandleaders often paid for their own radio wires, especially at smaller venues such as the Surf.<sup>20</sup>

During the Great Depression and its aftermath, Clear Lake was somewhat insulated from the financial and environmental devastation that affected the rest of the country. The economy of northern Iowa – and Clear Lake in particular – remained relatively diversified when compared to the rest of the Midwest, especially the more sparsely populated Great Plains. Agriculture and manufacturing were the primary industries in northern Iowa, but Clear Lake had its tourism, which gave it a leg up in surviving and even thriving during hard economic times. By 1939, its population stood at 3,600, an increase of 534 from 1930, with the nearby regional center of Mason City at 27,000. It is impossible to know what percentage of Clear Lake's population consistently attended concerts at the Surf throughout the 1930s, but the regular influx of tourists every summer certainly helped the venue operate in the black. One promotional brochure noted the availability of more than 600 cottages near the lake, in addition to several new hotels.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1940s swing bands continued to dominate the Surf's marquee. Glenn Miller, Al Menke, and Sammy Kaye were just a few of the nationally known bandleaders to headline concerts. However, the Surf also played an instrumental role in the war effort and soon became one of the preferred venues in all of northern Iowa to host war bond drive concerts. In this way, the ballroom literally brought members of the community and region together in the broader service of home front mobilization. As Lisa Ossian has noted, "Iowa developed and strengthened its own mythology of the perfect small town throughout the war."<sup>22</sup> Articles in the *Mason City Globe-Gazette* contributed to this mythology and, with particular relevance for Clear Lake, highlighted the

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20. Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 118–21.

21. "It's Good to Live in Clear Lake: City of Homes and Recreation" (Clear Lake, 1939), Joanne Watkins Scrapbook; "Come to Clear Lake, Iowa's Beautiful Resort City" (Clear Lake, 1939), Joanne Watkins Scrapbook.

22. Lisa Ossian, *The Home Fronts of Iowa, 1939–1945* (Columbia, MO, 2009), 91.

Surf's value as an entertainment destination in the service of war-time fundraising.<sup>23</sup>

Summertime concerts had the added bonus of drawing on the goodwill and pocketbooks of vacationers. On September 8, 1942, for example, the Surf hosted a war bond drive concert with bandleader Frankie Masters as the headliner. Admission was a \$100 maturity value bond per couple. By 1944, war bond drive concerts had become routine. In June of that year, the Surf hosted its "5th War Loan Dance." City leaders issued warnings about large crowds and encouraged concertgoers to purchase their tickets in advance. Once again, a \$100 bond was the price of admission. For these concerts, the Surf usually donated the space, and the bands donated their services.<sup>24</sup>

In late 1946 Fox decided to sell the Surf to the Aragon Ballroom Company based in Chicago. The sale netted Fox the sizeable sum of \$1.6 million for all three of his ballrooms, which also included the Terp and the Prom.<sup>25</sup> He stayed on in an advisory role with the company and maintained his residence in Clear Lake. But a year later tragedy struck when the building caught fire and burned to the ground. Almost immediately, management agreed to rebuild the Surf "larger and more beautiful than ever and as soon as possible."<sup>26</sup>

And it did reopen within 15 months, just in time for the popular Fourth of July festivities in 1948. The new Surf featured "every possible facility for your dancing pleasure," included air conditioning, a larger dance floor, 200 booths, more parking, and, perhaps most importantly, fireproofing.<sup>27</sup> The program for its opening week also revealed that popular music tastes were beginning to shift. Two nights were devoted to "Old Style Dances," featuring the Six Fat Dutchmen and Fess Fritsche and his band,

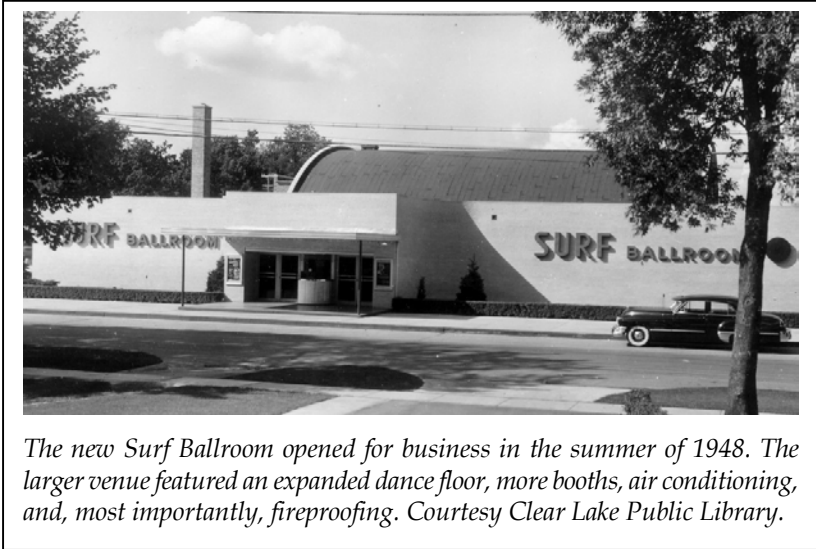
23 "Salute to Heroes' Opens September Bond Drive," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 8/31/1942.

24. "Announce Change in Plans for Sale of Tickets for 5th War Loan Dance at Surf," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 6/19/1944.

25. "Fox Sells Three Ballrooms to Chicago Interests," *Clear Lake Mirror*, 12/19/1946.

26. "Surf Ballroom to Be Rebuilt on Same Site at Clear Lake," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 4/25/1947.

27 "Announcing the New Surf Ballroom," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 6/30/1948.



*The new Surf Ballroom opened for business in the summer of 1948. The larger venue featured an expanded dance floor, more booths, air conditioning, and, most importantly, fireproofing. Courtesy Clear Lake Public Library.*

but on Saturday night, July 3, the Surf featured “Regular Modern Dance” with Ray Pearl and His Musical Gems. Pearl’s band actually wasn’t much of a departure in musical style from the popular big bands of the 1930s and 1940s since he was known for “sweet, smooth, and dreamy” arrangements, but change was slowly coming to the Surf as a different style of music began to take hold across the United States.<sup>28</sup>

### **The 1950s: Controversy, Conformity, and Change at the Surf**

When we look to popular culture as a guidepost for the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll, the simple narrative is that the genre began with Bill Haley and the Comets’ rendition of “Rock around the Clock,” which became even more popular when it appeared in the “classroom scare” film *Blackboard Jungle* (1955). Of course, “Rock Around the Clock” was popular primarily with one slice of the population: teenagers.<sup>29</sup>

28. *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 6/30/1948; “Ray Pearl, 83: Led Musical Gems Dance Orchestra,” *Chicago Tribune*, 2/28/1997.

29. Adam Golub, “They Turned a School into a Jungle! How *The Blackboard Jungle* Redefined the Education Crisis in Postwar America,” *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 39 (2009), 21–22.

**ANNOUNCING THE NEW SURF BALLROOM**

**CLEAR LAKE, IOWA**

On July first, 1948 the new Surf Ballroom, the finest in the middle west, will open at Clear Lake, Iowa, replacing its former predecessor destroyed by fire 15 months ago. Every possible facility for your dancing pleasure has been incorporated in this new, biggest structure, located across the street from the former Surf. Seaside and winter air conditioning—large dance floor—ample check-in facilities—dances—200 booths—restaurant—bar—ample parking. The name finally informed all acquaintances that endorsed the old Surf in its thousands of parties has been preserved in a new setting of beauty and charm that we know you are going to like.

**OPENING WEEK DANCE SCHEDULE**

GRAND OPENING DANCE	Thursday	July 1
Ray Ford and his "Musical Genes"		
OPENING OLD STYLE DANCE	Friday	July 2
Ray Ford and his Band		
REGULAR MODERN DANCE	Saturday	July 3
Ray Ford and his "Musical Genes"		
PRE-HOLIDAY DANCE	Sunday	July 4
Jack Cole and his Orchestra		
HOLIDAY SPECIAL	Monday	July 5
Ray Ford and his "Musical Genes"		
SPECIAL OLD STYLE DANCE	Tuesday	July 6
St. Fat Orchestra		
Pre-Opening Builders' Dance	Wednesday	June 30
Sponsored by Contractors, Their Employees, and Guests on This Night. PUBLIC NOT INVITED.		

HOURS: 9:00 P. M. to 1:00 A. M.

**ADMISSION PRICE POLICY**  
 25 cents plus tax "Walk Days"  
 50 cents plus tax Saturdays, Sunday and holidays  
 Prices include free check-in and free parking  
 There will be no dancing in public during the opening week with such low prices prevailing but the dancing in public during this opening week with such low prices will be the same as when charged at the old Surf.

**SURF BALLROOM**  
 Clear Lake, Iowa

*This advertisement promoting the opening of the "New Surf Ballroom" appeared in the Mason City Globe-Gazette, June 30, 1948.*

At the Surf in the early 1950s, most of the acts were familiar faces from the prior decade, such as Wayne King, the Waltz King, Henry Charles and His Orchestra, and Jan Garber. In Clear Lake, teens generally stayed away from these acts, preferring instead to patronize businesses like the Barrel Drive-In, where radio DJ's blasted the latest, edgiest rock 'n' roll hits and young couples found refuge in their cars away from the prying eyes of adults.<sup>30</sup> The most frequent performers at the Surf, by contrast, were far from edgy and helped to reinforce a dominant belief about the decade: "a pervasive, powerful, public ideology proclaiming the United States a harmonious, homogeneous, prosperous land."<sup>31</sup>

30. Douglas Thompson (recalling his experiences as a teenager in Clear Lake during the 1950s) in discussion with the author, May 2018.

31. Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America* (New York, 2003), 9.

However, several ugly episodes regarding race relations in the Surf's history challenged this perception and upended the idealized vision of small-town America that Clear Lake boosters had worked for decades to cultivate.

On June 13, 1952, an integrated group of members of the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) union from Waterloo and Des Moines attended a leadership training school in Clear Lake. One evening they tried to attend a square dance at the Surf, but the doorman refused them entry because several members in the group were black. Backed by the UPWA, African American Isadore "Pat" Patterson Jr. filed a lawsuit against the Surf's manager, Carroll Anderson, accusing him of violating Iowa's civil rights law. Shortly thereafter, another African American, Charles Bennett, from Mason City, filed a similar lawsuit against Anderson after he and his date were denied entry to see Louis Armstrong at the Surf on July 30, 1952.<sup>32</sup>

Patterson's suit (which Bennett later joined) was covered consistently for several weeks in September 1952 in the press as the case was brought before a six-member justice court jury. Coverage of the trial revealed that Anderson and his employees had discriminated against African American customers on several occasions earlier that year. Assistant County Attorney Murray Finley got Anderson to admit that a month prior to the Patterson incident a group of African Americans had been denied admission when they attempted to purchase tickets to a Lionel Hampton concert. Anderson defended his actions by stating that (a) "the Surf reserved the right to refuse service to anyone," and (b) he believed that these particular African Americans "would not fit into the particular social group." Anderson also defended his actions by arguing that he was "just following the orders" of the Chicago-based owners of the Surf, Prom Inc.<sup>33</sup>

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32. Multiple accounts of the evenings in question when Patterson and Bennett were denied admission were published in the *Daily Iowan*, *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, and *Des Moines Register* throughout early September 1952. For the first incident, see also Bruce Fehn, "'The Only Hope We Had': United Packinghouse Workers Local 46 and the Struggle for Racial Equality in Waterloo, Iowa, 1948-1960," *Annals of Iowa* 54 (1995), 211.

33. *Ibid.*; "Surf Manager Says No Policy Barring Negroes," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 9/17/1952.



IOWA'S WONDER SHOW PLACE  
**SURF**  
NO. SHORE • CLEAR LAKE, IA

TONIGHT, Friday, LEO  
And His PIONEERS  
Sat., June 16, Al Menke

**SUNDAY, JUNE 17**

AT THE SURF



ONE NIGHT ONLY

**LIONEL HAMPTON**

King of the Vibraharp. Terrific entertainment — wonderful dance music. One of the largest Bands ever presented at The Surf . . . 25 members. Very successful at Indianapolis — drew 20,000 people. At the Castle Farm Ball people were turned away after Ballroom was filled to capacity. His next Big Stop is the Hollywood Bowl. Don't miss an attraction such as this when you live so near.

Admission \$1.47 plus tax

*Lionel Hampton's appearances at the Surf in 1951 and 1952 were occasions that resulted in lawsuits brought by African Americans who had been denied admission to the Surf. From Mason City Globe-Gazette, June 15, 1951.*

Some news coverage in northern Iowa newspapers drew attention to the fact that Patterson and Bennett's suit was being bankrolled by the UPWA and that, consequently, these "outsiders" were forcing their progressive views of racial equality and integration onto the community. Ultimately, Andersen was acquitted by an all-white jury, which consisted of five retired men and one female homemaker. A week after the verdict, the *Des Moines Register* published a letter to the editor sent by Esther Walls from New York City.

The so-called civil rights case held in Mason City regarding the refusal of the Surf Ballroom management to admit Negroes is another blot on Iowa's good name. It recalls the incident in Sioux City when a soldier of Indian ancestry was refused burial in a cemetery there. It also makes one feel that sentiments in Iowa regarding racial justice and equality are not so different from those one would expect to find in a rural Mississippi town. The decision, which allows the management to decide who shall enter based on whether or not such individuals fit in with the social group in attendance is a travesty of justice. Iowans should bow their heads in shame.<sup>34</sup>

The UPWA, however, resolved to keep fighting against discrimination at the Surf, and the owner's win was short lived. A year later, in November 1953, Mrs. John Amos of Mason City, again with the help of the UPWA, filed suit against the Surf ownership for denying her admittance to the ballroom on December 8, 1951. On the evening in question, Mr. and Mrs. Amos, along with six other African Americans, wanted to attend a Lionel Hampton concert but were stopped at the door. This time, the case was heard in federal court, and the judge ruled that a ballroom was indeed a place of amusement and thus was subject to civil rights law. Although Mr. and Mrs. Amos won only a \$400 judgment of the \$10,000 they sought, their victory was significant. From 1939 to 1950, Iowans brought 22 civil rights cases to court. Of those, only three resulted in a conviction and/or fine. Additionally, national publications like *Jet* magazine took notice of the legal win. The *Des Moines Register* also published an editorial that recapped the case and commented on the significance of the decision within the context of the broader civil rights movement at the time. "This time, discrimination was rebuked and civil rights triumphed. It still takes a lot of persistence and a lot of help for a Negro to get the rights the state has guaranteed to him since 1884 and the federal government longer than that—but nowadays, that persistence and that support are beginning to show up."<sup>35</sup>

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34. Esther Walls, "A Civil Rights Case and Iowa Ballroom," *Des Moines Register*, 9/28/1952. For the Sioux City incident Walls refers to, see Thomas A. Britten and Larry W. Burt, "The Sergeant John R. Rice Incident and the Paradox of Indian Civil Rights," *Annals of Iowa* 63 (2004), 279-310.

35. "'Rights' Jury Awards \$400," *Des Moines Register*, 11/25/1953; George William McDaniel, "Trying Iowa's Civil Rights Act in Davenport: The Case of Charles and Ann Toney," *Annals of Iowa* 60 (2001), 235-36; "Award \$400 to Iowa

These court cases laid bare the ugly reality of racism in the northern half of the United States.<sup>36</sup> In the case of Clear Lake, although the community had promoted a progressive image of itself for decades (beginning with the era of the chautauquas), it also embodied what Gunnar Myrdal, in his 1944 landmark book, *An American Dilemma*, termed “the social paradox of the North,” namely, that “almost everybody is against discrimination in general but, at the same time, almost everybody practices discrimination in his own personal affairs.”<sup>37</sup> The Surf unfortunately illustrated that very paradox of northern racism precisely at the moment when the national struggle for civil rights was gaining significant momentum.

### The Winter Dance Party

The winds of cultural change in the 1950s extended as well to the growing influence and economic clout of America’s teenagers. At the Surf those developments culminated with the infamous Winter Dance Party at decade’s end. As Thomas Hine notes, “The roughly two and a half decades from immediately before World War II to the beginning of Vietnam—from the adolescence of Andy Hardy to that of Gidget—might be termed the classic period of the American teenager.”<sup>38</sup> Teens as a distinct group had enjoyed a new sort of recognition since the 1940s, perhaps most vividly marked by the inaugural issue of *Seventeen* magazine in September 1944. Northern Iowa was not immune to the increasing spending power of teens. In April 1957, for example, the *Mason City Globe-Gazette* included many advertisements for movie theaters, restaurants, and other dance halls throughout the region

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Woman Barred from Dance,” *Jet*, 12/17/1953, 6; “A Victory for Civil Rights in Iowa,” *Des Moines Register*, 11/26/1953.

36. Historians too often overlook racism in the North and Midwest. As Thomas Sugrue has noted, “The exclusion of the North—or its selective inclusion as a foil to the southern freedom struggle—comes at a cost. It ignores the long and intense history of racial violence and conflict in northern towns and cities.” Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York, 2008), xv.

37. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York, 1944), 1010.

38. Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager: A New History of the American Adolescent Experience* (New York, 1999), 225.

clearly targeted at teen audiences. The local drive-in movie theater frequently featured rock 'n' roll-themed weekends, playing the music of Fats Domino, Elvis Presley, and Pat Boone nightly and offering autographed photo and record giveaways.<sup>39</sup>

At the Surf, many of the dances had long drawn youthful, energetic crowds, but those crowds were beginning to grow older. Indeed, the venue seemed to resist shifting musical tastes (much as it had resisted racial integration after it was sold in 1946) and continued to book many of the same acts it had hired in the 1930s and 1940s. On May 11, 1956, however, manager Carroll Anderson announced weekly teen dances to be held during the summer months. A year later, the television program *American Bandstand* debuted on ABC. Featuring clean-cut teenagers and the perpetually peppy, youthful Dick Clark as the host, the show effectively sold rock 'n' roll to Middle America. Although the program did feature artists of color, including Chuck Berry, Frankie Lymon, and an up-and-coming Latino singer from southern California, Ritchie Valens, it was not as progressive in the realm of civil rights as it appeared to be. Officially integrated in 1957, *American Bandstand* featured only one African American couple dancing before the cameras (in a sea of white teenagers), and of course they could only dance with each other.<sup>40</sup>

Although the Surf continued to book primarily middle-of-the-road orchestras and big bands, musical acts that occasionally offered something a little edgier began to appear. Spike Jones, an entertainer known for pushing the boundaries of his music into both the satirical and experimental, appeared on March 12, 1956 (a Monday night). The advertisement proclaimed that there would be "Dancing until 1 a.m."<sup>41</sup> Apparently, Jones's popularity at the time allowed for a very late-running performance—on a school night, no less! Acts targeted specifically at teens included local radio disc jockeys who spun the latest rock 'n' roll hits and a lo-

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39. See, for example, advertisements in the *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 4/26/1957.

40. "Weekly Teen Dances to Begin at Surf," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 5/11/1956; Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 40. See also Matthew L. Delmont, *The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950s Philadelphia* (Los Angeles, 2012).

41. *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 3/12/1956.

cal group known as Jack Rockufeler and the Records who made many appearances at the Surf in the latter half of the decade.<sup>42</sup>

The local newspaper also reflected national anxieties about youth culture and the increasing popularity of artists who embraced rock 'n' roll, especially Elvis Presley. Although Presley never performed at the Surf, his profile nationally was prominent enough that his influence was felt even in small-town Iowa. In December 1956 the *Globe-Gazette's* editorial page included a reprinted column by Ed Creagh (distributed by the Associated Press) titled "An Elvis Presley Century." Creagh lamented the state of the country, tying Elvis's popularity to atomic anxiety and what he perceived as a general national malaise linked to increasing consumerism and misplaced values.

History may say that this sideburned youth who wriggles his hips while singing popular songs was a symbol of this time—that this century does a lot of wiggling and squirming without getting anywhere. Try to imagine a Presley in the 1800s when tougher people than we were forging the world we seem to be dithering away. But let's not be too hard on Presley. Doubtless he does the best he can, and nobody should interfere with his right to do it. But when the American people shell out over a million dollars a year to watch him do it—. Well, leave it at that. Maybe this is an Elvis Presley century.<sup>43</sup>

This writer's column on Elvis spoke to larger concerns related to juvenile delinquency and the general state of America's young people across the nation. A month before the *Globe-Gazette* published "An Elvis Presley Century," it had reprinted portions of an article by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who cited statistics from 1955 showing that 42 percent of major crimes were committed by individuals under the age of 18. Hoover blamed parents, specifically "parental incompetence and indifference . . . for youthful behavior problems."<sup>44</sup> In reality, most historians agree, the hype

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42. "Dick Co-Ette '1957's Top Disc Jockey,'" *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 9/19/1957.

43. Ed Creagh, "Roving Reporter: An Elvis Presley Century," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 12/13/1956.

44. E.A.N., "Straws: Showing Which Way the Wind Blows," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 11/9/1956. See also Jennifer R. Terry, "Cultivating Healthy Personalities: Iowa and the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth," *Annals of Iowa* 75 (2016), 130–63.

and hysteria over juvenile delinquency was unfounded, but it did become ripe fodder for cultural expressions of youthful restlessness in such arenas as film, comic books, fashion, and, of course, music. At the same time, as Joshua Garrison notes, intense currents of atomic anxiety led to Cold War “Youth Scare” rhetoric from adults seeking to regulate the morality and perceived degradation of America’s young people.<sup>45</sup>

Northern Iowa was hardly a hotbed of youthful rebellion. When the Surf was not hosting musical acts, it was used primarily for a wide range of regional events, thus contributing to a shared sense of community identity and civic engagement. In January 1957, for example, the ballroom became the venue for the “Teens against Polio” benefit at which a “North Iowa Polio Queen” was chosen, with all proceeds awarded to the March of Dimes. Much as in the war years a decade prior, the Surf played an important role in bringing individuals from across the region together to fight a different sort of insidious evil that had preyed upon the nation’s youth for decades.<sup>46</sup>

By decade’s end, members of the first wave of baby boomers were turning 13, and the demographics of the country had transformed so that there were now many more residents under the age of 20 than over the age of 40. Now that the teenaged population had become substantial, it was clear that this demographic group had, in the words of Victor Brooks, “developed a distinctive appearance, musical taste, and vocabulary that overshadowed even the decidedly youth-oriented Jazz Age and swing years.”<sup>47</sup> And, although the Surf continued to host musicians that seemingly belonged to the earlier eras of jazz, big bands, and swing, in the winter of 1959 manager Carroll Anderson readily agreed at the last minute to add the Surf to the “Winter Dance Party” tour, which showcased a group of young rock ‘n’ roll artists not much older than their core audience.

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45. Joshua Garrison, “The Teenage Terror in the Schools’: Adult Fantasies, American Youth, and Classroom Scare Films during the Cold War,” *American Educational History Journal* 36 (2009), 3-21.

46. “Will Choose Polio Queen,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 1/29/1957.

47. Victor Brooks, *Last Season of Innocence: The Teen Experience in the 1960s* (Lanham, MD, 2012), 9, 21.

CLEAR LAKE IOWA WEDNESDAY THE FINEST BANDS **Surf**

FRI., JAN. 30th MIDWEST CARAVAN  
Sat., Jan. 31st **RAY LEWIS**  
And His Orchestra

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 2nd — DANCING 8 TO 12 P. M.

**WINTER DANCE PARTY**

**BUDDY HOLLY**  
and **THE CRICKETS**  
"PROUD BOY"

**BIG BOPPER**  
"CHARMILY LACE"

**RITCHIE VALENS**  
"DYNAMITE"  
"COME ON, LET'S GO!"

**DION**  
and **THE BELMONTS**  
"I WONDER WHY"

**FRANKIE SARDO**  
"THE OUT"

For Ages 12 to 21. This All-Star Cast  
Bob Hale to M.C. & Spin Records. Adm. \$1.25; Checking 35¢

*The Winter Dance Party was promoted in the Mason City Globe Gazette in the days before the famous concert on February 2, 1959. From Mason City Globe-Gazette, January 28, 1959.*

Organized on a shoestring budget by the General Artists Corporation, a group of unscrupulous record promoters, the Winter Dance Party is most remembered for the three performers who never made it out of Iowa: Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J. P. "The Big Bopper" Richardson. Other artists on the bill included Dion DiMucci (of Dion and the Belmonts), Frankie Sardo, and Waylon Jennings, who played bass in Holly's band. The touring conditions were terrible, with very little thought given to the geographic distance between concert venues, exacerbated by harsh winter weather. As the group crisscrossed Wisconsin, the heating system in one of the buses quit working; another bus broke down near Ironwood, Michigan. Holly's drummer, Carl Bunch, suffered

frostbite on his feet and needed to be hospitalized. Leaving the buses and Bunch behind, the musicians boarded a train to Green Bay and performed as planned on February 1, 1959. The performance at the Surf was scheduled for the next day. The bands arrived in Clear Lake via that unheated bus, pulling up an hour before show time. Despite the last-minute booking, ticket sales were robust; about 1,300 fans turned out to see the show despite the cold weather and a Monday night performance.<sup>48</sup>

Upon arrival in Clear Lake, Holly – fed up, exhausted, and fighting a cold – made arrangements to charter a private plane to the next stop, Moorhead, Minnesota, in order to avoid the ten-plus-hour ride in that same unheated bus that awaited the group at the conclusion of the show. A local company, Dwyer’s Flying Service, housed a single-engine, four-passenger Beechcraft Bonanza airplane. Owner Jerry Dwyer was unavailable to fly, so instead a 21-year-old, less experienced pilot named Roger Peterson got the assignment. As a result of the combination of Peterson’s inexperience and the weather conditions, the plane crashed into a cornfield less than five minutes into the flight. The pilot and all three passengers were killed instantly.<sup>49</sup>

Dwyer discovered the plane wreckage the next morning. Crash investigators and a photographer for the *Clear Lake Mirror Reporter* arrived on the scene shortly thereafter. A rather gruesome pair of photographs showing the bodies of the men strewn about the wreckage appeared on the newspaper’s front page on February 5, 1959. A week later, the same paper printed a request from a teenaged Ritchie Valens fan in Illinois who wished to have crash photographs sent to him personally.<sup>50</sup>

Today in Clear Lake, several antique shops along Main Street feature yellowing copies of the newspaper with images of the crash, appealing to a macabre fascination with how these men perished. And yet the plane crash is only one piece of a bigger picture that includes how the cultural memory of the Winter Dance Party has evolved since that bitterly cold night in February.

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48. Kevin Romig, “Not Fade Away: The Geographic Dimensions of Buddy Holly’s Meteoric Career,” *Journal of Texas Music History* 11 (2011), 12.

49. Ibid.

50. *Clear Lake Mirror Reporter*, 2/5/1959, 2/12/1959.





*One local antique shop in downtown Clear Lake contains a Winter Dance Party corner of memorabilia, including promotional photographs of Holly, Valens, and Richardson and framed images of the plane crash. Author's photograph.*

In the immediate aftermath, Clear Lake, and northern Iowa more broadly, moved on relatively quickly. On February 4, the *Globe-Gazette* noted that these “Dead Rock ‘n’ Roll Stars Had Many Fans” in Mason City, and the reporter interviewed several record-store owners in town to verify that claim.<sup>51</sup> Most press coverage at the time noted that the entertainers were young and that they were “all on the way up as singers.” Holly had the most established career, having toured in England for 25 days in 1958. Several years later, the Beatles discussed Holly’s influence on their band’s style and musical sound.

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51. Dave Dale, “Record Sales Go Up: Dead Rock ‘n’ Roll Stars Had Many Fans in City,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 2/4/1959.

The *Globe-Gazette* article about the victims' popularity shared space with a much larger advertisement for the Surf's next concert, one featuring Jules Herman and his Orchestra on the occasion of a "Pre-Lenten Benefit Dance." In the immediate months, and then years, after the crash, shows went on at the Surf as usual without much reflection or mourning.

### **Decline, Nostalgia, and Resurgence in the 1960s–1980s**

As America and the Surf Ballroom entered the 1960s, the venue's popularity declined. As musical tastes continued to evolve, the advent of "liquor by the drink" contributed to the venue's steep drop-off in attendance.<sup>52</sup> That change in Iowa law in 1963 allowed bands to play in small bars, thus drawing patrons away from ballrooms. As a result, the youthful crowds, the couples out for a night on the town, and the summer tourists did not flock to the Surf as they once had. One business leader plainly stated, "The Surf needs something in addition to the ballroom itself, because dancing is dying out."<sup>53</sup>

By 1967, the future looked bleak. Longtime manager Carroll Anderson moved on from his position at the Surf. Some city leaders raised the possibility of turning it into a convention center, but the plan failed and the Surf closed later that fall. An insurance company took ownership for several years while no one in town was quite sure what to do with what seemed to be an aging relic of a bygone era. In 1970 a group of local investors purchased it, but still there seemed to be little consensus on how the Surf might evolve with the changing needs of the community.<sup>54</sup>

In 1974, however, its future as a key site of nostalgia and cultural memory began to take shape. That year, a local businessman, Rex Livingston, agreed to lease the Surf from the group of investors with the goal of bringing back regularly scheduled Sat-

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52. For the debates that led to this change in Iowa law, see Jerry Harrington, "Iowa's Last Liquor Battle: Governor Harold E. Hughes and the Liquor-by-the-Drink Conflict," *Annals of Iowa* 76 (2017), 1–46.

53. "Surf's Future Is Discussed: Backing Sought on Proposed Convention Center," *Clear Lake Mirror Reporter*, 3/18/1967.

54. "Surf Ballroom Manager, Carroll Anderson, Resigns," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 1/11/1967; Morf, *Clear Lake, Iowa*, 119.

urday night dances.<sup>55</sup> In the intervening years, the Surf had been used primarily for private events. Livingston's timing reflected the first wave of 1950s nostalgia that began to grip the nation.

The resurgence of 1950s-style rock music began in the late 1960s, when Frank Zappa and his band, The Mothers of Invention, recorded a doo-wop-style concept album, *Cruising with Ruben and the Jets*, in 1968. It received a good amount of radio airplay, outperforming previous Zappa albums on mainstream radio stations. A year later the group Sha Na Na performed at Woodstock preceding Jimi Hendrix. The popular reception of the group's simultaneous celebration and parodying of 1950s rock 'n' roll prefigured the cultural nostalgia of the next decade.

Films and television in the 1970s displayed the appeal of nostalgia for the 1950s. In 1973 George Lucas's semiautobiographical coming-of-age drama, *American Graffiti*, featured an expansive 1950s rock 'n' roll soundtrack and placed a kind of nostalgic sheen on the youth culture of the late 1950s and early 1960s. A year later *Happy Days* made its debut and ran successfully on ABC for the next decade, romanticizing the same decade. The release of *Grease* in 1978 and its subsequent popularity at the box office rounded out a decidedly nostalgia-fueled 1970s popular culture. All of these examples celebrated the 1950s as a time of lost innocence and were hugely popular with audiences that were suffering through the disillusion surrounding the Vietnam War and Watergate.

Along with film and television recasting of the 1950s as a simpler, purer period in American history, the lives and musical contributions of Holly, Valens, and Richardson once again became fodder for the culture industry. In 1971 folk-rock singer Don McLean released "American Pie," a lengthy ballad that was at once profoundly personal and national in scope. Perhaps more than any other artist, McLean, with his lyrics about "the day the music died," reintroduced the dead musicians to a new generation of fans while simultaneously tapping into a national collective nostalgia. Several years later, in 1978, the film version of Holly's life, *The Buddy Holly Story*, was released to critical acclaim. A young Gary Busey earned an Academy Award nomination for his portrayal of the singer.

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55. "Surf Bringing Back Dances," *Clear Lake Mirror Reporter*, 10/29/1974.

All of this cultural nostalgia laid the groundwork for a concert held at the Surf Ballroom in February 1979, the twentieth anniversary of the plane crash. Billed as a “Buddy Holly Tribute Concert,” it was organized by local radio personality Daryl Hensley, otherwise known as the “Mad Hatter.” He took out a \$20,000 loan and used the money to round up a cavalcade of acts deemed contemporaries of Holly’s, including Del Shannon, the Drifters, and Nicky Sullivan, one of the original Crickets. Disc jockey Wolfman Jack (fairly well known at the time because of his association with the film *American Graffiti*, and, by default, 1950s rock ‘n’ roll) served as the master of ceremonies for the evening. It was such a success that the Surf played host to a second such concert the following year. The 1980 concert added former teen heartthrob Rick (Ricky) Nelson to the lineup. By that point, the Buddy Holly Memorial Society had formed and boasted 3,000 members from across the country.<sup>56</sup>

The 1980s brought more 1950s nostalgia to American popular culture. The film *Back to the Future* (1985) comically mined 1955 for laughs. *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), another 1950s-era time-travel-themed melodrama, was released a year later. That same year, a headline on *Esquire’s* cover read, “America on the Rerun,” commenting on the singer Madonna’s recent impersonation of Marilyn Monroe for her “Material Girl” music video, the enduring popularity of Ralph Kramden, and, of course, President Reagan’s “matinee” image. Indeed, as Michael Dwyer has argued, “the ‘Gipper’ relied on the ability to evoke the mythic Fifties small-town America depicted in film, television, and other forms of popular media—an America that featured a booming consumer economy, military strength, domestic stability, dominant ‘family values,’ and national optimism and belief in the ‘American Way.’”<sup>57</sup> Reagan certainly was not the first public figure to do this, but he was especially effective at harnessing nostalgia for the decade.

Against this backdrop, the Surf again gained national prominence in 1987. Douglas Martin, writing for the *New York Times*, published a sentimental travelogue taking readers down memory

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56. “Buddy Holly Tribute a Smashing Success,” *Clear Lake Mirror Reporter*, 2/7/1979; “Holly Tribute Begins Tonight,” *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 2/1/1980.

57. Michael Dwyer, *Back to the Fifties: Nostalgia, Hollywood Film, and Popular Music of the Seventies and Eighties* (New York, 2015), 1-2.



*In 1988 a section of street in front of the Surf was renamed Buddy Holly Place. In 2009 one segment of North Shore Drive was renamed Ritchie Valens Drive. Author's photograph.*

lane and waxing nostalgic about the “ghosts of the past” that haunt the ballroom. “On the sweeping maple dance floor of the Surf Ballroom, love and memory mix magically, then linger like the swirling, cloudlike light patterns on the ceiling. . . . From Basie to the Beach Boys, America’s music has waltzed, jitterbugged, twisted, and boogied through the Surf Ballroom. In more subdued fashion, it still does.”<sup>58</sup>

Martin went on to highlight the annual Winter Dance Party and the many visitors who came to the Surf from across the country, many of whom were “older.” Martin’s rediscovery of the Surf may also have had something to do with popular culture. At the time of publication, *La Bamba* (1987), a feature film depicting the life of Ritchie Valens, was doing well at the box office.<sup>59</sup>

58. Douglas Martin, “Ghosts of Past Haunt Floor of Old Ballroom,” *New York Times*, 9/18/1987.

59. *Ibid.*

A year later, civic boosters in Clear Lake made noticeable changes on the landscape that specifically recognized the three musicians. A plaque was placed just outside the door to the Surf commemorating Holly, Richardson, and Valens, and a street nearby was renamed "Buddy Holly Place."

### Dark Tourism and the Desire for Authenticity

The Surf's enduring popularity in the American cultural imagination is notable for another reason as well. A fascination with the macabre, or "dark tourism," has long persisted in American culture. From holocaust museums to the World Trade Center Museum and Memorial, visitors often feel compelled to visit sites of death and trauma. As Marita Sturken notes, "By visiting these places, tourists can feel that they have experienced a connection to these traumatic events and have gained a trace of authenticity by extension." Several other scholars have explored the topic in recent years. Chris Rojek's articulation of the term *Black Spots* is helpful for further defining the interest tourists have in the Surf and the crash site. Put simply, Black Spots are places where the famous have met their end. Rojek focuses primarily on the stretch of California highway where the actor James Dean met his demise. Members of the James Dean Fan Club commemorate the tragic event every year by retracing the route he took. Black Spots that are especially notable in the history of rock 'n' roll include Graceland (although the bathroom where Elvis died is not on the official tour), the Dakota apartment complex where ex-Beatle John Lennon was assassinated by crazed fan Mark David Chapman, and Room 100 of the Chelsea Hotel, where Sex Pistols bassist Sid Vicious allegedly stabbed his lover Nancy Spungen to death.<sup>60</sup>

In 1988, the same year that civic boosters began to capitalize on the musicians' link to the Surf more visibly around Clear Lake, a fan from Portersfield, Wisconsin, Ken Paquette, fashioned a stainless steel memorial in the shape of a guitar with three accompanying records etched with the artists' names, their biggest

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60. Marita Sturken, *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Durham, NC, 2007), 11; Melanie Smith, Nicola MacLeod, and Margaret Hart Robertson, *Key Concepts in Tourist Studies* (Los Angeles, 2010), 35–36; Chris Rojek, *Ways of Escape: Modern Transformations in Leisure and Travel* (New York, 1993), 137–45.



*A stainless steel memorial to Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J. P. Richardson erected by fan Ken Paquette marks the spot where the ill-fated plane came to rest in a north Iowa cornfield. Author's photograph.*

hits, and the recording labels. This monument now marks the crash site in a cornfield about five miles north of town. Before the memorial was created, fans would often come out to the field and leave flowers and other offerings along the fence line.<sup>61</sup> In 2009 landowner Jeff Nicholas took an extra step by commissioning a local artist to create a giant metal pair of black-rimmed glasses (like Holly's) that now marks the roadside for the benefit of visitors.<sup>62</sup> Today, fans leave all manner of ephemera at the crash memorial, including black-rimmed glasses, money, LPs and 45s, toy guitars, handwritten messages, and even undergarments.

University of Iowa musicologist Donna Parsons noted of the plane crash site, "I know this sounds macabre, but Buddy Holly's

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61. "Paying Tribute," *Des Moines Register*, 2/2/2009.

62. Peggy Senzarino, "Glasses Mark Path to Crash Site," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 1/28/2009.



*The addition of a giant sculpture of a pair of horn-rimmed glasses commissioned by landowner Jeff Nicholas in 2009 has made the crash site easier to spot along the rural road five miles north of Clear Lake. Author's photograph.*

DNA is in that ground, their spirits are there.”<sup>63</sup> Parsons’s remark helps us understand why fans feel so compelled to visit the crash site, and reveals as well the decades-old interest in how the musicians died, beginning with that young fan who requested photographs of the crash from the *Mason City Globe-Gazette* a week after it happened. In contrast to 1959, when the reaction to the plane crash was more muted (especially from a local perspective), the visual and material expressions of memory have been especially pronounced since 1988, the year Paquette erected his monument at the crash site. The surge in the desire for memorialization reflected national trends as well. As cultural critic Andreas Huyssen notes, the 1990s witnessed a “memory boom,” a “resurgence of the monument and the memorial as major modes of aesthetic, historical, and spatial expression.”<sup>64</sup>

63. Tom Snee, “Not Fade Away: Buddy Holly’s Spirit Lives on in Clear Lake,” *Iowa Now*, 7/19/2013.

64. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York, 1995), 3.



While Don McLean's "American Pie" aided in the recasting of the Surf and the crash site as sacred to rock 'n' roll fans as early as 1971, each anniversary of the Winter Dance Party since 1979 has accelerated the process. In February 2009, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the crash, the *Globe-Gazette* ran a photograph on the front page showing tourists tramping through deep snow out in that cornfield to get to the memorial. The headline read simply, "Pilgrimage." That term has been used historically to describe a religious journey that results in some sort of personal transformation. Of dark tourism in particular, "it can be said that people make pilgrimages to sites of tragedy in order to pay tribute to the dead and to feel transformed in some way in relation to that place."<sup>65</sup>

The 2009 *Globe-Gazette* article also demonstrates a generational orientation to the way cultural memory is created and maintained among baby boomers and their children. A photograph featured Charles City natives Dennis and Brad Tierney, a father and son united in their love for Buddy Holly. Son Brad states in the article that "he inherited his love for Holly and other early rock 'n' roll performers from his baby boomer parents." He is pictured wearing a Holly-style pair of black-rimmed glasses while his father wears his '61 high school letterman jacket.<sup>66</sup> As Erika Doss writes, "For many Americans, memory is defined by generational recollections of traumatic historical moments."<sup>67</sup> While the plane crash that killed Holly, Richardson, and Valens was not as transformative a moment as, say, the world wars or the Kennedy assassination, how it was memorialized in popular culture decades after the event contributes to its mythology. McLean's ballad certainly spoke to musical fans from the baby boomer generation that, at their oldest, would have been 13. McLean himself was that age when the plane crash occurred.

Since 1979's first tribute concert, the Surf has hosted a "Winter Dance Party" every year. It continues to draw legions of fans from across the nation and the world. Increasingly, those fans

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65. "Pilgrimage," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 1/31/2009; Sturken, *Tourists of History*, 11, 46.

66. Mary Pieper, "Love of Music Draws Holly Fans from Near and Far," *Mason City Globe-Gazette*, 1/29/2009.

67. Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago, 2010), 49.

have become a more intergenerational group—as they must if the ballroom is to sustain itself for the future. Upon the occasion of my own recent visit, I observed a young man in his thirties browsing in the gift shop with his young daughter as reproduction Winter Dance Party posters, poodle skirts, and cat-eye glasses were offered for sale.

Indeed, the Surf has undergone a transformation and rebirth, with a painstaking restoration now close to complete. In 2008 management of the Surf shifted to the North Iowa Cultural Center and Museum, a nonprofit entity that offers the all-volunteer board and executive director more flexibility in applying for grants along with a tax-exempt status. In 2009 the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame named the Surf a national landmark; two years later it was officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places. With that designation, an extensive museum was developed that now includes information, photographs, and artifacts on display for visitors. While the story of the Winter Dance Party from 1959 is the main focus, the ballroom's earlier history is not ignored; countless photographs of performers from the 1930s to the present hang throughout the ballroom.

On the occasion of my visit, historic preservationists were at work painstakingly repainting pineapples on the wall as they worked to restore the old murals. The polished maple dance floor, the elevated stage, and vibrant, colorful paintings of Holly, Richardson, and Valens hang prominently across from the stage. Elsewhere, the tropical theme is on display as the booths surrounding the dance floor look as if they should be filled with girls in poodle skirts and boys with duck tails. Nearby, the dedication speech given by a representative from the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in February 2009 is printed in its entirety for the benefit of visitors:

Fifty Winters Later, we also remember that rock and roll history couldn't just be told from the perspective of New York or Cleveland, Memphis or New Orleans. Rock and Roll radiated out into places like Montevideo, Minnesota and Clear Lake, Iowa and shook up a generation of kids who poured out of their houses to see the real thing. The musicians battled grueling conditions to make it happen. From opening night in Milwaukee to the show in Clear Lake, the group played eleven nights in a row and covered 2,600 miles in

frigid temperatures, hitting mainly small towns. Tours like the Winter Dance Party gave kids a chance to imagine themselves on stage, singing or playing the guitar—maybe even writing songs. Kids like Bob Zimmerman (later Bob Dylan), who traveled from Hibbing, Minnesota to see the show at the Duluth Armory on January 31st.

Lauren Onkey, Vice President of Education and Public Programs,  
Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Museum

Onkey's sentiments are particularly important in that they seek to affirm the value of the midwestern small town in the promotion and dissemination of transformative culture. In the broader context of music history, the Surf Ballroom has played an important role in that dissemination of culture, even if the civic boosters of Clear Lake were somewhat slow to officially recognize its significance.

## Conclusion

The Surf Ballroom now serves as the cornerstone for Clear Lake's image, although the small town's civic boosters have long been effective in marketing it as a vacation wonderland in a state with few natural lakes and watersheds. Brochures and postcards featuring sailing, fishing, carnivals, marching band concerts, and, of course, dance halls long ago replaced materials promoting the Chautauqua. Throughout the decades, however, the character of the community has always retained a kind of wholesome flavor as the solidly middle-class playground of northern Iowa.

Nostalgia is powerfully and skillfully utilized in Clear Lake, especially during the peak summer months when classic car shows occur once a month and the Surf offers a range of concerts targeted primarily at baby boomers. The venue's 2018 acts suggest that perhaps the Surf has evolved a bit generationally in the kind of musical nostalgia it works to perpetuate. A tribute concert to Prince in celebration of what would have been his 60th birthday, the once edgy rock band Kiss, the Devon Allman (son of Gregg Allman) Project, and a constantly rotating lineup of big bands, including the still active Jan Garber Orchestra, round out the spring/summer schedule. Nostalgia has, of course, obscured the uglier side of Clear Lake's past, that of racism and the outright denial of civil rights to African Americans. There is also a

darker element of tourism at work in Clear Lake: the macabre kind of “death tourism” that compels visitors to peer at yellowing newspaper accounts of the accident that still hang in Clear Lake’s many antique shops and to head out to the plane crash site.

The question looming over the Surf’s enduring popularity is whether the venue would still exist at all without the tragic deaths of Holly, Richardson, and Valens and the resulting mythology that surrounds them. Fox’s two other ballrooms, the Terp and the Prom, closed their doors long ago. The reality is that Clear Lake’s now very visible commemoration and promotion of the Surf would not have occurred without the demand and desire of outsiders — music fans — who seek an authentic connection with 1959. Consequently, the story of the Surf Ballroom raises all sorts of fascinating questions related to the shaping of public memory, the meaning of authenticity, and the role popular culture plays in commemoration. It also reveals how generational shifts in cultural taste have a significant impact on how history is interpreted and valued, whether that history is local, regional, or national in scope.