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The History of the Cameo Theater

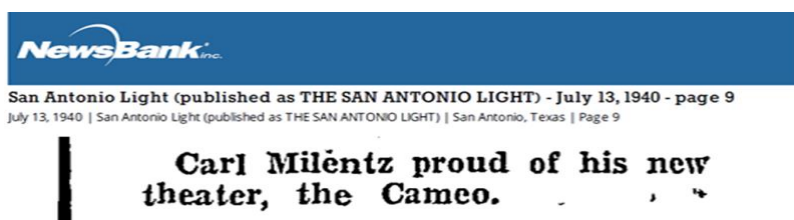
Patricia Gutierrez

HIST 4301

Professor Philis M. Barragán Goetz, Ph.D.

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On March 20, 2015, Pastor Doug Robins held a church service in the Cameo Theater. He remembered one of the parishioners stating, “Hey, Pastor Doug, I went to a rave and I did Ecstasy right there, and now I’m coming to church here.”¹ From its founding in 1940, up to the present day, the Cameo Theater has been a host to a number of diverse events, everything from religious services to raves. On June 11, 1940, the Cameo Theater opened and was owned by Carl Milentz.²



The Cameo Theater offered many useful religious and entertainment services for the community. However, this would come to a halt when the Cameo Theater was converted to a Temple of Islam. Milentz died in 1964, and shortly after his death, Lucille D. Zipp and Herbert Oliver purchased the theater.³ In the Release of Lien, it explains in January 30, 2015, James A. Zaccaria individually as independent executor of the estate of Avalee A. Zaccaria was in the release of Lien showing that she died. In the form it was in August 17, 2010, in the document the original principal amount was \$646,210.56 to the Borrower of Cameo Theater Corporation. In the release of lien, it stated that the lender was Avalee A. Zaccaria but since she passed the release of lien would be Zaccaria.⁴ On March 19, 2015, Zaccaria sold the Cameo Theater to City Church Downtown. The Church Downtown needed to take a loan to purchase the theater. The

¹ *San Antonio Express-News*, Debra Martin, Church purchases Cameo Theatre, (San Antonio, Express-News.

² *San Antonio Light*, “Carl Milentz proud of his new theater, the Cameo, July 13, 1940. (9).

³ bexar.tx.publicsearch.us/results?department=RP&recordedDateRange=17530101%2C20200507&searchOcrText=false&searchType=quickSearch&searchValue=Carl%20Milentz

⁴ <https://bexar.tx.publicsearch.us/results?department=RP&recordedDateRange=17530101%2C20200507&searchOcrText=false&searchType=quickSearch&searchValue=James%20Zaccaria>

Cameo Theater not only provided a space to entertain the community, but also provided a space for political activism for the advancement of African American rights.

In the spring of 1940, Milentz, a white man who was born in Missouri, was 50 years old, and living with his parents. He was a cashier in a local theater, where they lived on a farm in Daisetta, Texas. His father's name was, Albert R. Milentz, who was also in the theater business as an owner and a manager. His mom's name was Winona Milentz, and she was the assistant manager.⁵ In 1940, William F. Schutz sold a lot on 617 East Commerce to Milentz. The theater was going to consist of frontage of nearly 42 feet and depth on North Center Street. The theater was supposed to have 750 seats and be of reinforced concrete. At first, Milentz wanted to name the theater Avon. Milentz got a permit that was worth \$25,000 for his theater. Glenn C. Wilson was Milentz's architect in designing the theatre. In addition to the theater itself and the projection area, there was a lobby and entry foyer. The theater will have a colored concrete exterior.⁶

On June 7, 1940, the San Antonio Register newspaper announced the official opening of the Cameo Theater, and advertised several community events that were happening in the theater.⁷



⁵ 1940 United States Federal Census, Liberty, Alabama, Liberty, digital image s.v. "Carl A Milentz," Ancestry.com.

⁶ NewsBank. "\$25,000 Theater Being Built Here." San Antonio Light, March 17, 1940.

⁷ Salas, Mario M. Black History in San Antonio-The Cameo Theatre & Black Commerce Street: SA Observer, February 11, 2020.

The Cameo Theater was open to the public but was mainly for African Americans. The Cameo Theater was not the first movie building in San Antonio specifically for Black audiences, but in the 1940s, it was a space where Black artists and performers could show off their skills and their different talents. It was built on 1123 E Commerce St. in downtown in an area that became known as St. Paul Square. This vicinity was once used as a center for black businesses that catered to the surrounding neighborhood due to segregation. There were different types of entertainment at the Cameo Theater, such as films, concerts, dances, entertainers, and religious services.

The Cameo Theater, in 1940-1979: Different Types of Entertainment

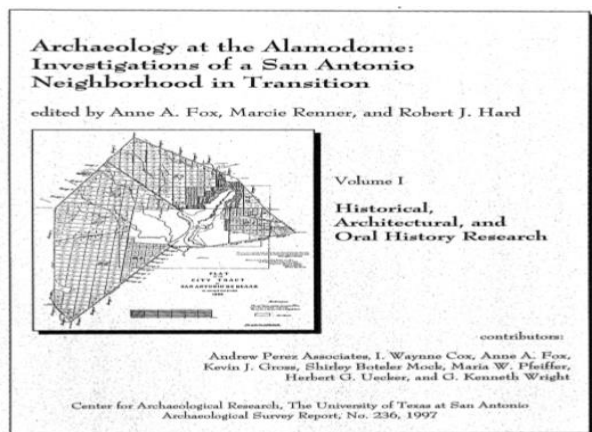
During the 1930s and 1940s, the Cameo Theater helped turn the east side of San Antonio into a place where many famous African American artists performed, and where Black patrons did not have to experience any humiliation. When Black San Antonians wanted to attend a show at the Majestic and Empire theaters, they had to enter through a separate entrance and sit in the “colored balcony.”⁸ When an individual performed at the Majestic or Empire, it was really for white audiences. After the artist would play his act, he would return and do the whole act again with his Black audience on the east side at the Cameo Theater or the Library Auditorium. The Cameo Theater was for black producers that had the latest Black films. It was also for musicians and singer that played in the theater. The performers who played at the Cameo Theater were Fats Domino, B.B. King, and Louis Armstrong. Many of these performances were advertised in the local Black newspaper. In the *San Antonio Register*, advertisements encouraged patrons to come dance to the “Hot Hi-De-Hi Harmony,” and a large crowd would show up to the dance.

⁸ Paula Allen, “Rex Theater Served Black Audiences on San Antonio’s West Side in the 1940s, ‘50s,” *San Antonio Express News*, November 10, 2017.

Cab Calloway and his Cotton Club orchestra; performed at the Library Auditorium on Hackberry Street.⁹

The Cameo Theater also showed many films written, produced, and directed by Black filmmakers and writers. Many of these Black produced films sought to create optimistic and realistic representations of Black life and to demonstrate the hypocrisy of racialized thought. Such movies were trying to counteract white supremacist propaganda.¹⁰ The Cameo Theater featured the films of Black performers, like Bert Williams, Nina May McKinney, Ethel Waters, and others. “*Cabin in the Sky*” starring Lena Horne, in 1943, was a popular film. It first appeared at the Majestic, so the opening day was exclusively reserved for black viewers. Everyone cried that this was unfair, competition, as the Cameo was open. It was a different point in supporting black performers and movies, especially with an all-black cast.¹¹

Jewel of a theater reborn



⁹ Archaeology at the Alamo: Investigations of a 'San Antonio Neighborhood in Transition,

¹⁰ Salas, Mario M. Black History in San Antonio-The Cameo Theatre & Black Commerce Street: SA Observer, February 11, 2020.

¹¹ "Jewel of a theater reborn," 1983, Cameo Theater Vertical File, Texana Room, San Antonio Public Library

Spencer Williams, who was a Black filmmaker made “race movie.” One of the movies he made was, the *Blood of Jesus*, which was released in 1941. The movie was made in Texas, and it was shown in the Cameo Theater.¹² In the 1960s, the films were split into two parts of a showing, and people were able to listen to recordings of the new Black music, such as Booker T and the MGs, during the intermission.¹³ In the Cameo Theater there were entertainers, “Pigmeat” Markham and Ralph Cooper. Pinkie Smith states, “*Beale Street Mama*,” was the popular movie that was shown at the Cameo. The film was filmed in San Antonio. The film's name was "Stormy Weather," with Lena Horne leading, so she became an attraction.” Interestingly, these scenes became a favorite of the theater-goers in the later years of "Amos and Andy." In St. Paul Square there was segregation that was east of downtown.¹⁴

There was also an incident of violence at the Cameo Theater. In 1942, there was a suspect shot Ben Malone who was 29-years old, because he took his girlfriend to the Cameo Theater. Malone was shot through the top of his right chest with a bullet and was treated at Robert B. Green hospital. The woman who was involved with the alleged love triangle is name Evelyn White.¹⁵

In the building there was an incident where members of the Black community protested at the City Hall. African Americans were not treated equally in City Hall. Black people were denied and did not get the chance to expand the four-story half- building, on 336 East Commerce St., into a hotel. Before the City Zoning Board, G.H. Russell, counsel for Pinkie Smith, 1204 Lombrano Avenue, attempted to prove that the demonstrations were due to racial discrimination,

¹² Salas, Mario M. Black History in San Antonio-The Cameo Theatre & Black Commerce Street: SA Observer, February 11, 2020.

¹³ Salas, Mario M. Black History in San Antonio-The Cameo Theatre & Black Commerce Street: SA Observer, February 11, 2020.

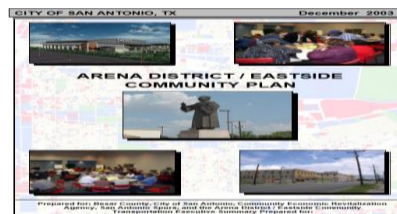
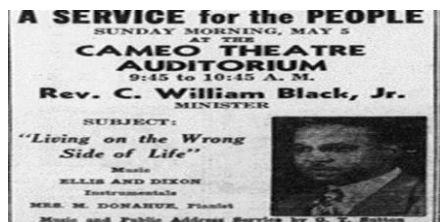
¹⁴ "Troupe Revise Theater," 1981, Cameo Theater Vertical File, Texana Room, San Antonio Public Library

¹⁵ *NewsBank*. “Negro Held as Man Is Shot.” San Antonio Light, January 07, 1942.

but any property-owner called to sue by their solicitor, Egbert Schweppe, denied this. The Cameo Theater manager stated, “The negroes have been pushed around, and have had to live in “dumps” for years.”¹⁶

In the Cameo Theater there will be a ceremony for Black patrolmen for best traffic record. Many school patrolmen in San Antonio will be getting rewarded for their performance and by having the best traffic records. Rewards will be given on Friday, which include tickets to a motion picture and two cartoons. In addition, the young patrolmen will also get the chance to meet Commissioner P.L. Anderson and Judge C.J. Matthews, who will be awarding them. The Black school patrols will also be receiving rewards; however, they will need to go to the Cameo Theater, says Birchsel.¹⁷

In the Cameo Theater there was even church that was taking place. Rev. C. William Black, Jr held service on a Sunday morning May 5, 1946.¹⁸ G.J. Sutton and Reverend Claude Black, Jr., two leaders in the NAACP, were closely tied to the Cameo Theater. Black held religious services there without having to pay rent because he cleaned the kiddie cowboy movies. Black had to clean the mess that people left in Cameo Theater, such as popcorn boxes and ice cream.¹⁹



¹⁶ NewsBank. “S.A. Negroes Lose Fight for Hotel.” San Antonio Light, August 24, 1944.

¹⁷ NewsBank. “School Patrols To Be Honored.” San Antonio Light, May 12, 1944.

¹⁸ Andrews, U. J. San Antonio Register (San Antonio, Tex.), Vol. 16, No. 15, Ed. 1 Friday, May 3, 1946.

¹⁹ Adopted_arenaeastside_Final.pdf. Dec. 2003

There were few surprises during this time in the Cameo Theater, for example, Chief Bischel suspended Patrolman Roscoe Eddings from his duty because he fired his gun without any orders, and he was off duty that day. The incident happened at the Cameo Theater when Eddings accidentally shot and wounded Leroy Williams. Williams told Eddings to stop firing in the theater. Eddings explained that he fired because Williams said a wrong threatening gesture, and that's why he shot at him.²⁰ In the Cameo Theater, Williams brought his case to the district court and sued for \$50,000. The Policeman Eddings said he accidentally shot William, but Williams says that Eddings shot him on purpose on his hand, and he is no longer able to live his life.²¹

The Cameo Theater was bought by many other buyers who owned the theater. James Zaccaria, owner of the Cameo Theater at 1123 East Commerce, the grant has helped give the building's exterior its first makeover since 1980. This will help bring back new patrons to the Cameo Theater. The grant would also help patch a hole in the roof and assist to make a few improvements.²² The Cameo Theater in 1940 The Cameo Theater in 2015



²⁰ NewsBank. "Patrolman Suspended." San Antonio Light, March 07, 1958.

²¹ NewsBank. "Policeman, Theater Sued." San Antonio Light, April 08, 1958.

²² Davis, T. Vincent. "Eastside nonprofit celebrates first anniversary." (San Antonio, Tex), August 14, 2011.

In the inaugurated, Major Henry B. Cisneros and United San Antonio Executive Director Lila Cockrell cut the ribbon that was made of theater tickets for Friday at the renovated Cameo Theater. In the image, Lou Nelle Sutton was in the photo with Mayor Cisneros at St. Paul Square. During the event, there was Mariachi music, and, snipping a roll of theater mission tickets, Cisneros offered special recognition to the efforts of Eureste and Zaccaria's family owners and renovators of the 500-seat theater. Zaccaria stated, "invested over 100,000 converting the former movie vaudeville house into a hall where we can build the bridge between professional and community theater."²³



According to Zaccaria states, "I want to travel and do stuff that being tied to a very long-houred theater doesn't afford," said Zaccaria."²⁴

Pastor Robins even said that the church leaders agreed to buy the Cameo and carry on their dedication to the downtown area.²⁵ The building was restored that dot the downtown area and rejuvenate San Antonio's past. According to the article, "And that's what a "cameo" is: A sculptured piece of gemstone or shell that can shine brightly when placed next to fine jewelry."²⁶ Zaccaria sold Cameo Theater to City Church Downtown. The importance of my research is on the impact on the Cameo Theater, and how many events happened in the Cameo Theatre.

²³ "Renovated Cameo Theater inaugurated," 1981, Cameo Theater Vertical File, Texana Room, San Antonio Public Library

²⁴ Davis, T. Vincent. "A Boost For The East Side." (San Antonio, Tex), August 15, 2011.

²⁵ Martin, Deborah. "Cameo Theatre now owned by City Church." San Antonio Express -News, March 19, 2015.

²⁶ "Jewel of a theater reborn," 1981, Cameo Theater Vertical File, Texana Room, San Antonio Public Library

According to Adolf Pesquera, he states that, “Built circa 1940, the Cameo Theatre at 1123 E. Commerce St. was the first movie house in San Antonio specifically built for the African American community. It is a designated local landmark and the present time is being used as a place of worship by City Church Downtown.

In the Virtualbx online, says that the action is so the public can learn about how the Cameo Theater use to look. It shows us how the theater will be upgraded, and it will not be used as a theater in the future. However, it will be used as a City Church Downtown for the time being. With the church, there will be many important upgrades to the facility. There is going to be new painting on the walls to make everything look fresh. Researching the Cameo Theater, it helped me understand what was destined for the space. The author of the website explains through editing, and he even creates a digital page for VBX. The author works for Hearst Corp, American Lawyer Media, New Corp, and Freedom Communications. In this article it shows how the Cameo Theater will look before and after the makeover. In this picture this is from the Virtual Builders Exchange online. Jim Zaccaria, the owner of the Cameo Theater.²⁷



²⁷ Pesquera, Adolfo. “Hearst Corp: “St. Paul Square's Cameo Theatre Due for Renovation.” Virtual Builders Exchange, April 19, 2018.

In conclusion, I believe the Cameo Theater brought back the historical events that happened at the Cameo Theater. The Cameo Theater not only provided a space to entertain the community, but also provided a space for political activism for the advancement of African American rights. In doing my research, I learned a lot about every detail that happened at the Cameo Theater. According to Rev. Claude Black responded, “Before you talk about the history of an area like this you must know the context. History is not made by wealth. It is made by creativity, by doing without and by overcoming limits. This is all part of the history of black people. In talking about poverty areas, you must know the history that led to that area.”²⁸

²⁸ Adopted_arenaeastside_Final.pdf. Dec. 2003

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