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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. If you were a Michigan teen in the late 1950s through the 1960s, chances are you had heard about The Music Box in Houghton Lake. You likely made the cruise to Michigan's largest inland lake at least once to join in the dancing and romancing. Most young people who did it once soon made it a ritual, with many visiting weekly. Up to 5,000 young people typically gathered at the Box on Friday and Saturday nights and on holidays. The record crowd was on July 4, 1967 when 7,200 admission tickets were sold at a dollar each.

Perhaps you get misty-eyed even today just thinking back on those memorable nights. The Music Box beckoned like a searchlight to 16-21 year olds for more than 35 years. The heyday was during the late '50s and early '60s when Michigan's first baby-boomers began maturing.

Mark Barnhart, Sr. remembers those nights well. Mark began making the weekly trip north from the Flint area in 1957 at age 14. He was big for his age and managed to slip in, though technically under the minimum age of 16. Mark had first discovered the Box while visiting at a friend's family cottage. Before long the dance-craving young man found a way to Houghton Lake every week, even if he had to hitchhike. After all, he was in love -- with an enchanted place. By 1962, he was working for Music Box owners Lee and Shirley Kelly, helping with security and later the music system and even spinning the platters in the final years.

Today, Mark owns the approximately 5,000 records, mostly 45s, but with some 1940s 78 rpm records mixed in. These records comprised the Box playlists through the years. Both Kellys are now deceased but Lee's brainstorm upon returning from the Army Air Corps and World War II led to creation of one of Michigan's most popular dance venue and teen romance halls.



The Music Box, Houghton Lake, circa 2001, approximately 3 years before it was demolished by owner Lee Kelly.



Lee and Shirley Kelly, 1946, upon Lee's return from World War II.

Lee knew that an important part of war life revolved around the limited opportunity for socializing. 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 to 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.

He immediately wrote home to his wife Shirley and told her about his idea for a business for when he returned from the war. Lee, who had grown up in Detroit, was used to plenty of entertainment diversions growing up but Shirley, whose maiden name was Verrinder while growing up at Houghton Lake, was not. 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 late 1940s they built a small open-air dance pavilion on this spot and a half-century of history began on July 4, 1946, when they opened for business. In the first season they didn't even have power on their



The open air dance floor and fireplace, as it originally appeared in the late 1940s.

property, so they 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 box as many times as they wished for the evening. The concept quickly caught on with the local teen-agers and The Music Box was off and running.

In the beginning things were simple: a cement slab in the wooded setting, and the jukebox in a small building. Within three years 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 maintained the grounds and equipment, commuting on weekends from his jobs downstate, as a teacher of the emotionally impaired at the Pontiac State Hospital and with the Detroit News. He monitored the dance floor and Shirley would spin the records; most of which were 45s by



A typical Music Box crowd shown here in 1961.



An interior photo of the "Orange Room" dance floor, just as couples were arriving for a night of dancing in 1958.

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 to enjoy dancing under the stars and moonlight on summer nights. It wasn't long before they 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 a weekend to get in two nights of dancing. They'd dance to the tunes played by Shirley, known to them as "the blonde in the tower." Shirley played the records from a tower that had been built in 1955 to allow her a view of the entire dance floor at a glance, and it housed the three turntables that she used for spinning the records.

Sylvia McCollough recalls her first time at the Box.

"I spent a lot of time in the summers around Houghton Lake," she said. "The first time I stepped inside the Music Box with my girlfriends, I thought I had died and gone to heaven! The special lighting effects, decorated trees, and everyone dancing; of course, we were all so cool then, poodle skirts and ducktail haircuts, doing the Soc! Those were great fun times, and I was sad to hear the Box closed. I met a lot of neat kids there from all over Michigan, and had a few summer romances as well."

A typical late 1950s dance night would open with Bobby Freeman's 1958 hit "Do You Want To Dance?" By the mid 1960s this had been replaced with "Let's Dance" by Chris Montez.



An interior view of the open dance floor and surrounding facilities. This was taken shortly before the Music Box was dismantled.

The closing set of songs remained consistent from the late 1950s. All of the those played were slow songs to allow young lovers ample opportunity to close out the night dancing cheek-to-cheek.

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 even forbade 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. The goal of every patron was to avoid getting shined for inappropriate behavior during the evening. Those 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 test, you didn't dance at the Box.

In fact, this strict adherence to running a classy operation compelled Lee to dismantle and tear down the Music Box after it closed for the final time after Labor Day weekend,



An early view, c. 1948 of The Music Box structure and sign along M-18 and M-55, Prudenville, MI.

001 when he could no longer physically run it himself. 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. In declining health, Lee even contacted Mark Barnhart and obtained a pledge from Mark that when his business license expired, after his death, that Mark would renew it.

"Lee wanted to make sure nobody ever opens up a bar and uses the name The Music Box," Mark said. He

recently honored his old boss' request when the license came up for renewal for the first time since Lee's death. And that's why 50s and 60s parents didn't worry much when their teens announced they were heading for a night at the Box.

And head for Houghton Lake they did! 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. Typically on Friday and Saturday nights those highways would be bumper to bumper with cars heading for the Box. Of course, gas was cheap and cruising was a common weekend pastime. So the teens would cruise to the Box, as they called it, and often back up traffic for many miles.

The attraction of the Music Box continued for over 35 years uninterrupted and then, as quickly as it had arrived on the scene in 1946, the Box was suddenly quiet. The doors closed and, seemingly overnight, the Music Box went dark. Few people knew what had happened to the still-popular entertainment spot or why the hall had stood for more than a decade with no evening dances and little visible activity, although the building and grounds were immaculately kept.

As much as Lee and Shirley loved all the young people who frequented their establishment through the years, often “adopting” local youngsters and offering support and advice, the two were equally dedicated to each other. Though they had no children of their own, Lee and Shirley lived a fairy-tale romance that equaled that of any kindled between two young lovers on the dance floor through the years.

Michelle Bennett of Houghton Lake recalls her images of the couple.

“I can remember as a young gal going there, him standing out front, tall, dark and very handsome. I also can remember Shirley in the tower.” Michelle recalls the Kellys cared about their young customers outside of the dance hall too. “I was very close to them...and they always kind of watched out for me,” she added.

After 35 years of countless nights in the unheated control tower, Shirley was suffering from 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 decided to shut down the operations. He then devoted more than 10 years to Shirley's daily care as her health declined. He couldn't bring himself to reopen the dance venue with Shirley no longer able to enjoy playing the records. He wouldn't sell the facility either at the risk of breaking Shirley's heart.

In 1996 Shirley's long bout with arthritis came to an end and by 1999 friends and fans finally convinced Lee to reopen the Box on weekend nights. For three years, until Labor Day weekend of 2001, The Music Box again held Friday and Saturday night dances, with Fridays dedicated to the adults who had danced there as young people for nostalgia nights and Saturdays reserved for the 16-to 21 year-olds. But it wasn't the same and after that three-year run, with Mark Barnhart now helping to spin the records that had been converted to compact discs, Lee again decided to shut down the Music Box and put 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. 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 agonizing decision to tear down The Music Box, but first he auctioned off much of the furnishings and audio equipment and even parts of the building. Many past patrons flocked to the auction to buy up pieces of the dance floor and the structure so they could always have a small piece of The Box to rekindle their fond memories. By 2004 The Music Box was no more and, in April 2010, Lee joined Shirley on the eternal dance floor.

Long-time Music Box Employee Relives Glory Days

Mark Barnhart, a resident of Houghton Lake, Michigan today, was a regular at The Music Box in the early 1960s. As word of The Music Box spread and crowds grew, Lee Kelly realized he would need to hire help to run the operation on weekend nights. Over the July 4th holiday in 1962 Mark went from patron to employee and began a lifelong association with Lee and Shirley Kelly, the owners of The Box.

"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. It turned out that Kelly recognized the young man as a longtime patron and was looking for help for the night. Mark recalled their conversation.

"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.

"I worked steadily for Lee and Shirley as a bouncer first and then later helping with the sound system, even buying records when I was downstate in Saginaw, Flint and Detroit. Shirley would tell me which ones she wanted and I'd search them out in the record shops.," he said. "If a song was particularly popular Shirley would want to have multiple copies of it, since we'd play them so much we'd wear them out," Mark added.

Mark said that he was one of about 80 employees through the years. Later on, Mark often helped simply out of friendship, especially after Lee reopened the Box for a few years in 1999, following Shirley's death. Today, Mark 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.

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.



Lee Kelly sitting behind the wheel of his 1956 black Ford Thunderbird.

The Closing Set of Songs Kept Dancers Cheek-to-Cheek

The “enchanted” Music Box was known for keeping teenagers hopping on the dance floor but when the final 15 to 20 minutes arrived before the 1 a.m. closing time, Shirley Kelly would queue up the closing set which from the early 1960s almost always consisted of the following seven slow songs. During the Korean War era the final song played was always "God Bless America" by Kate Smith and during the Vietnam era performed by Connie Francis.

Here are the songs that regular patrons remember well, typically played in this same order, followed by the performers and the year released:

- "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)

All photos courtesy of Mark Barnhart.

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