

July 9, 2006----

To live in Chicago is to keep dancing through the transitions. Music goes in and out of style with the snap of a finger, and neighbors change with the wave of a hand. The city keeps pace to new beats.

But fantasy is always in fashion, and since July 1926 scores of working-class Chicagoans have escaped into the mystical Aragon Ballroom, 1106 W. Lawrence, built to resemble a Moorish castle courtyard from Aragon (a 1400s kingdom that preceded modern Spain). Newspaper advertisements for the ballroom that year promised "visions of languorous señoritas and dashing caballeros, of moon-drenched patios and stately turrets gently brushing Mediterranean skies."

That setting was perfect in the spring of 1948 for a young man who, after a week's work in the stockyards, started to court a young coal miner's daughter from downstate. Those are my parents. Their union enabled me to return to the Aragon and enjoy the Clash's 1979 "Combat Rock" tour on a hot summer night, when I drank beer from a plastic bucket -- a practice no longer deployed at the ballroom.

But that was just one phase of the ballroom's evolution. During the late 1960s, the Aragon was a "mod" discotheque known as The Cheetah, financed by Borden Stevenson, son of Adlai. The Aragon also has been a roller rink and a bingo hall. Regulars have called it "The Aragon Brawlroom."

Today, the Aragon is owned by a partnership group that includes Luis Rossi, former publisher of La Raza newspaper. Rossi came to Chicago from Uruguay in 1970. His partner Ivan Fernandez came to Aurora from Havana, Cuba, and partner Mercedes Fernandez (no relation) is also from Cuba and worked with Ivan before coming to the Aragon. They've helped to usher in a new wave of music to the ballroom -- reggaeton, norteno, Latin rock.

On July 19, the Aragon celebrates its 80th anniversary. Rossi recently unearthed a plaque that places the opening date as July 19, 1926, instead of the previously reported July 14. Mayor Big Bill Thompson bought the first ticket. Nearly 8,000 people attended the grand opening of what was billed "the most beautiful ballroom in the world." The gala was thrown in honor of the Fraternal Order of the Elks, which was holding its national convention in Chicago. Ted FioRito-Dan Russo's Orioles headlined.

Built at an original cost of \$1.75 million, a recent visit to the Aragon revealed a more than \$1 million renovation that has spruced up the 20,000-square-foot ballroom. The Spanish-Moorish stucco and gold leaf columns have been

repainted. The Aragon's original mahogany and glass doors are being restored, and Terra-cotta arches have been repainted. More than 90 percent of the Aragon's terrazzo tiles are original, and all the tiles have been refurbished. The old ballroom sings again.

"You fall in love with this building," Rossi said. "There's so much history, there's so much architecture."

Armando Lopez has been the Aragon's general manager since 2003. "People are starting to notice that the Aragon is a little nicer," he said. "We've been doing architectural galas, a boys and girl's club gala. They're all black tie."

Lopez books 30 to 40 Latin music dates a year and works with Jam Productions, which books 20-25 alternative and rock acts annually at the Aragon. The Aragon also hosts monthly boxing with professionally ranked fighters, and some are nationwide broadcasts on Telefutura-Channel 60.

"We've looked at pictures from the past," said Lopez, 38. "We want to keep the same color schemes. In January, we repainted the ceiling." Until recent years, projected clouds from the balcony moved across a light blue ceiling that resembled the sky. "The starlights still work," Lopez said. "But now with all their elaborate lighting, groups don't want the clouds on."

The basement features a 1921 Seeberg pipe organ, 2,000 organ pipes -- and a mile of model train track. This same workspace is the ballroom's former speakeasy.

The Aragon's old speakeasy was run by bootlegging king Hymie Weiss and the gang of Charles "Deanie" O' Banion -- a Capone rival who was gunned down in 1924. The underground tunnel allegedly used by the O'Banion gang to scurry between the Green Mill Gardens and the Aragon's speakeasy just recently was boarded up. Dave Jemilo, owner of the Green Mill for 20 years, said, "There is a passageway going that way from the Green Mill building, but it is boarded up halfway across the street. I don't know what's past there."

Al Capone's private booth was in the southwest balcony, where he had an escape route down a fire escape that faces the Green Mill and Uptown Theater. The Aragon's original Wurlitzer pipe organ with faded ivory keys still sits in the southeast balcony, across the dance floor from Capone's perch.

During a recent visit, the crew for the heavy metal band Slayer was setting up for a sold-out show of 4,500. Legendary Aragon stage manager Jolly Roger was on hand, prepping for the gig.

"The thing about the Aragon is that if a show is good, no matter winter or summer, the walls start to sweat," he said while clutching a boxed bottle of Johnnie Walker, requested by Slayer members. "And the humidity gets in the room, and you can feel

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ARAGON BALLROOM, LAWRENCE NEAR BROADWAY, CHICAGO

how thick it is."

My father saved a picture postcard from his younger days at the Aragon. It is carefully wrapped in cellophane. The postcard clearly depicts the ballroom dance floor, and it says, "He Who Has Not Been At Aragon Knows Not What A Paradise It Is!"

The Aragon remains a fantasy escape as it did for me, my parents and even the people who work there -- people like house organ player Brian Durack.

Durack has been working lights and performing at the Aragon for 36 years. He has been employed by six Aragon owners. "This group is the best," he said. "They are pouring money into the place. It's never looked better."

Born and reared near Madison and Pulaski, he is the ballroom's resident historian. While growing up, on clear summer nights he could hear big band music from the Midwest Hotel at Hamlin and Madison. His parents, Mary O'Brien and Lester Durack, met in 1932 at the Aragon. Lester Durack was an engineer at the old Sun-Times building on North Wabash.

Brian Durack learned to play the pipe organ in 1956 from a nun at Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wis.

"In 1970 I came in here to rebuild a piano," Durack said. "My predecessor asked if I could run lights that night. I said I had never run lights. He said I was hired."

Durack, 65, was at the Aragon that afternoon preparing to work the spotlight for the Slayer concert, which also featured bands called Lamb of God, Children of Bodom and Thine Eyes Bleed. But Durack likes to perform tangos and foxtrots on the \$100,000 Wurlitzer. He still plays the mahogany beast on special occasions.

"I like the stuff that was played in this place's heyday," he said. "It's difficult to play." Durack pointed to a corner across the dance floor. "That's where the pipes are. It takes so long for the sound to get here, you're on the next beat by the time you hear the sound. It's tricky. It's a labor intensive instrument. There are a couple thousand pipes over there and they're all out of tune.

"Everybody says it can sound like an orchestra. That's a lot of hooey. It always sounds like an organ. It can sound like a xylophone, because it has one. It can make sounds of tuned bells, because it has tuned bells. But it's an organ!" The room fell quiet, except for the rhythmic stacking of Marshall amps for the Slayer show. Durack looked at the Wurlitzer and said, "Basically, this is dead. Most kids don't have any idea about this."

But there is a place where Durack is reborn.

Durack's organ space, approximately 25 feet beneath the main ballroom floor, consists of 2,000 silver and tin organ pipes lined up like bamboo sticks, the organ and a circular model train track with a replica of the Super Chief that ran between Chicago and Los Angeles. The space is accented by dim gothic lighting.

"Sometimes I come down here after midnight and play the pipe organ," Durack said before sitting down to perform the Viennese classic "The Old Refrain" on the Seeberg. He has jerry-rigged an old drum kit from a theater in Kewanee to the 600-pound pipe organ.

"There's nobody in the building, and I'm so far down no one can hear me," he said. "Sometimes I'll play until 6 in the morning."

Durack salvaged most of his organ pipes from abandoned churches. He said, "When the Archdiocese of Chicago closed the churches, I was there. I picked out the best. You can tell the best by sight. It's like looking at a piece of jewelry. And these are the best. The Archdiocese never wasted their money, at least on organs."

Not surprisingly, the ghosts of the Aragon love the atmosphere. "I'm not worried," Durack said. "They are good ghosts. They dance. Actually there is a couple that dances together."

He did not smile.

Around the basement corner of Durack's workspace is an empty, 10-foot deep silo. During the Aragon's glory days the silo would be filled with blocks of ice. Fans would be turned on, which would blow cool air upstairs to the ballroom. This archaic cooling system was used between 1926 and the late 1960s, when real air conditioning was installed.

"What happened to the Aragon is like what happened in the real estate business," co-owner Rossi said. "It's a neighborhood that used to be one of the best in the city. It went down, and now it's coming back."

The ballroom's original motor still faithfully hums in the basement. The basement still has chest-high water lines from a March 1958 flood. The next door Normandy Lounge declined to use a towel service recommended by the mob. The diner was mysteriously bombed. The resulting fire didn't damage the Aragon, but water to put out the fires did.

The music has survived the turmoil. And Durack holds his songs close to his heart. Besides classical material, he likes try out Cole Porter and the Beatles on his historic pipe organs. "The Beatles wrote some great stuff and it sounds good on the organ, although few people have heard it on the organ," he said. "Songs like 'A Day in the Life' Songs like 'Yesterday.' Songs that only begin to describe the fantastic legacy of the Aragon Ballroom.

