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Blue-collared rhythms are in the jazz, jokes and the jump cut of the come-on neon of Calumet City - once the Barbary Coast of the Midwest.

Through most of the '40s, the prosperity of wartime manufacturing in northwestern Indiana brightened Calumet City, and gaudy glory came to the State Street strip near the Illinois-Indiana line. Thrill-seekers would start at the Go-Go Shay Club at the corner of State Line and State streets and work their way west through speakeasies such as the Zig-Zag Club, Club Chesterfield and the Yo-Yo Club.

Shows usually were staggered, so as one club's revue ended, another club's show began. Chicago jazz musicians such as Sun Ra and Von Freeman often played in the house bands in the strip joints.

In January, 1941, Life magazine reported, "Calumet City has 14,000 inhabitants, no railroad station, no Protestant church, no traffic lights, no central telephone system, 308 nightclubs and seven policeman. Forty years ago, it was a home of a prosperous white slave ring, and 20 years ago, the headquarters of a rum-running outfit."

For one moment in 1944, Calumet City had a ratio of one bar for every 46 residents, the best in the country. The street began to get straight in 1961 under the reform-oriented reign of Mayor Joseph Nowak.

If any town has been stuck with a bad tattoo, it is Calumet City. Today's residents prefer to talk about assets such as the Cottage restaurant or the River Oaks Mall instead of the part of town that used to be known as Sin City. But even in her stale perfume, the State Street strip remains the most colorful part of town.

The street is serene just before the second-shifters hit around midnight on a Monday. The whistle of a slow-moving freight train traces the pace. From the sidewalk into the Whiskey a-Go-Go, you can see an older blond slothfully interpreting the acoustic version of John Cougar Mellencamp's "Small Town." On the sidewalk, fresh weeds boogie through old fractures. And maybe the best indicator of change on State Street is that next to the Chesterfield Go-Go Lounge is the Double R&R - a gay bar.

State Street is a nuked memory.

The rhythm still lives in the music:

It's only natural that cosmic keyboardist-percussionist Sun Ra (Le Sony'r Ra)

developed his poetically agnostic style of playing during the '40s in Calumet City.

"See, we were able to create," Ra said in a conversation last weekend after his sets at Chicago's Bidy Mulligan's. "They didn't restrict us in our playing. All they wanted you to do was swing - I'll put it that way. And some of the best drummers played the street. The strippers always had to have a good drummer - for their bumps, you know."

The Cal City strip helped young musicians to develop stamina.

"We used to play through from 8 in the evening until 5 in the morning," Ra said. "The shows were staggered, so oftentimes I'd go to a nearby club to play while I was on intermission at another place. I'd be playing continuously and be getting paid at two places. The musicians were dedicated to the music - we didn't make much money, maybe \$10 a night. But we were working regular, because the strippers always needed music."

Ra remained loyal to State Street, even after 1946 when he joined Fletcher Henderson's band, housed at the elegant Club de Lisa on Chicago's South Side. Ra would play with Henderson on Monday and Tuesday nights and switch to the Calumet City clubs the rest of the week.

"They (the strippers) always needed someone who could read," he said. "And they always wanted the standards, because that's what they danced to. I played everything from 'Rhapsody in Blue' on. And I had never heard those songs before."

Ra was introduced to Calumet City by South Side trumpet player Lonnie Fox, who was in constant search of a pianist who could sight-read. "I was a good friend of Foxy, and he had been playing with Lil Green," Ra recalled. "He wanted me to come out there, and since he was out there, I thought I'd go out with him. Von Freeman played out there, too. We used to go out to Cal City together, and we'd have a lot of fun, talking on the way in (from 75th and South Parkway in Chicago)."

Despite doing almost a decade in Sin City, Ra said he never found time to socialize with the strippers. "I was pretty reserved," he said. "I was studying the psychic thing (Ra's image has consistently been defined by mysticism) and music during the little intermissions I had. What I remember are the emcees. They did all kinds of things. There was one guy who did a whole science-fiction thing as a host, and I dug that. He was 'The Man With the Glass Head.' He had music to it and the club's other pianist always played for him. One night the other pianist had to go across the street and play for Charlie Ventura, and it came that I had to play for the Man With the Glass Head.

"So the Man With the Glass Head got up and said he couldn't do his usual bit because he had a different pianist," Ra continued. "I got mad, so suddenly I hit a chord on the piano and everything on the piano - the music, the flowers - all

jumped to the floor. He turned around and looked at me, and said, 'On second thought, uh, I think I will do that - just play whatever you want to.' When I got through playing for him, he said it was the best music he ever heard."

That was Calumet City of the '40s - a crashing chord in a quaint Midwestern musical.

And the rhythm lives in the humor:

It's fitting that the red, white and blue plaid jacket emcee Joey Gerard is wearing looks like a wrinkled road map unfolded in the Midwest. The slight, 62-year-old host at Skull's Rainbow Room (and strip joint) in Nashville's Printer's Alley has worked everywhere from the Monticello supper club in New England to burlesque houses in Los Angeles.

And, of course, the Calumet City strip in the early '60s.

Times may have changed, but Gerard's shtick is constant. He works the small stage with a flashlight, often beaming in on lonely soldiers from nearby Fort Campbell. He fires off timeless lines to bald men, lines like, "Every time you have sex, you lose the hair on your head." Or when a guy comes in with a girl, Gerard asks the "fella" to leave. "The strip show is for the needy, not the greedy," he crows.

For the strippers, Gerard plays bad tapes of show tunes like "There's No Business Like Show Business" and no tunes like "Lady Love" from a dusty portable cassette player that sits under a cellophane American flag taped to the wall. Stone-faced customers sip from the Elvis Fizzle - a fresh, fruity cocktail served over crushed ice in a commemorative "Elvis - Still the King" glass.

"I learned to do all that stuff in Calumet City," Gerard said in a phone interview months after a friend and I had enjoyed his Nashville Printer's Alley show. "There was no school for it. You go out there, introduce the girls, and when a girl wasn't ready for one reason or another, you had to go out there and do time. You had to have a lot of material.

"I still work the lights and the sound like I did in Calumet City," Gerard said. "It's a one-man show, two-girl show. Right now, Helena DeVise is headlining and Teska is the house girl. (The headliners travel what circuit is left, the house girls live in town.) But it was years ago that the strippers came up with some great names. That's when Candy Barr was around. There was Penny Annie and Helen Bedd was a good one."

Gerard has gentle memories of Calumet City.

"Calumet City had a bad reputation, but I don't think any of the acts really realized it," he said. "I worked the Rip Tide, the Show Club (regarded as the toughest spot

on the street and now a parking lot for abandoned cars), the 21. You couldn't do straight comedy in those places. That's where I picked up the flashlight routine. And the clubs never closed. They ran 24 hours a day and live music filled about 12 of those 24. The girls would stop around noon and start again around 8 o'clock and run until 4. There was a lot of good jazz to hear when you got off work. It wasn't a tough job, it was just a long job."

Gerard has been working the burlesque-vaudeville circuit for more than 40 years. "I like to entertain - I certainly haven't done this for the money," he said. "Yet, I don't think I've ever been happier. The patron saint of actors is St. Genesius and the story goes that he had nothing to give the Christ child. All he could do was juggle, so he juggled and the Christ child laughed. That's sort of stupid and maudlin, but he gave himself and that's the reason people of my generation entertain."

"The musicians who have been on the road all those years, making \$30 a week and riding buses through Cal City - the strippers, the comics and the singers . . ."

Gerard listed them out loud. "That's all themselves."

I asked Gerard to tally his mileage before and after Calumet City.

"Oh, my Lord, I'd be afraid to think how many miles I've logged since I went off the road 11 years ago," he said. "It would be a million, I'm sure."

"But I'll always remember Calumet City."