

INTERVIEW WITH JOHN HANSEN - SEPTEMBER 1995

A real estate developer, John was born in New York City in April of 1938. In April of 1967 he moved to Houston and later purchased the property which would give birth to both The Black Labrador Pub and Cezanne. John helped Dave in his efforts to transform the club from a neighborhood piano bar into a world class jazz venue.

I own the real estate which houses Cezanne and The Black Labrador and another shop or two, as well as the building to the south of it, a five story office building.

To give you some background, the whole complex was originally a church, the Central Church of Christ, and it was the mother church of that denomination. It had in its' missionary efforts decided to develop a nursing home, I believe. They borrowed money from the banks and pledged the assets of the church and its' land and everything. Then they actually compounded their problem by raising additional funds through selling bonds to their congregation. The nursing home failed, putting the church property in jeopardy from the banks, who wanted to be repaid. And even more so they were wiping out the savings of their congregation, which was a serious thing. It was even carried on television and got a bunch of press.

A real estate broker, a lady that I know, came to me and said that she thought that the architecture of the building was worthwhile, and I agreed. It's by a well known architect who practiced here in Houston by the name of William Ward Watkins. He did Rice University and the Museum of Fine Arts and a number of significant buildings and he was in his time the number one architect.

I looked at the property and I met with the elders of the church, and I've joked since that I wanted to make sure that if the press got a hold of this that I didn't want to see a headline saying, "Developer Buys Church for Profit." I said that I didn't think that I could handle that, but that I could see a re-use of the property, and if they would support me in any media problems I might have... I made them an offer, assumed the bonds, and paid off the banks. They used it for about a year and then they disbursed themselves into the various congregations that had spun off from this church. This all took place in '85 and '86.

We looked at various uses for the property. We decided that the sanctuary, which was the sensitive area of redevelopment, needed to be treated more sensitively, and I decided to give it to the city of Houston if they would use it for a public library. I thought that was a proper use of the sanctuary, and should they ever change their mind on that it reverts back, but they were excited about the area and about the possibility. I conveyed to them about that time the sanctuary and the bell-tower, known as the *Campanile*, which is Italian for bell-tower.

With the balance of the property, the buildings, they've had various uses. The University of St. Thomas bookstore was there for a while. We had a soda fountain. The pub, the Black Labrador, was put into operation in late '86. For a couple of years it languished a little bit but eventually it took off. There was a storeroom upstairs, and in 1989 I emptied it out and decided that we could have a wonderful, romantic piano bar where lovers would come after work. Well, Houston doesn't have any romance left in its' soul I'm sure, but I could see a small black man playing wonderful music in the background. I saw it as a background place.

We had a couple of fine pianists come do it. Paul English, who's a well known artist here, opened it for us. But Paul wasn't into background music. He gave shows, and I remember the night he told everyone to shut up please because he was playing. It turned out that Paul was not into that particular venue, so we went more background, but it wasn't generating anything. We had a number of people, and Dave was one of the people who came to the general manager. All of this was done through the general manager at that time.

Dave started playing up there periodically after Paul left. He came to me and said that he would like to book some additional people besides himself, and I thought that was alright; we carried it for awhile. And then after a time it was just too much of a burden, and Dave and I met and I said, "Look, it's not generating enough." We had it open Monday through Saturday. People just didn't go out. I mean there would be four people there on some nights, and I said, "It doesn't make any sense." So what we decided to do was to open up on Friday and Saturday nights only. He used some of the other nights for a jam session with some of the other musicians in town on Monday or Tuesday nights, whenever he felt like it. I gave him the door which was his to charge, and then we served the beer, wine and food. And that's the way it really evolved.

He started booking some incredible acts and playing himself, and all of a sudden Cezanne became a place to go. On Friday and Saturday nights it was not uncommon for the forty seats to be overflowing, but the bottom line of course was that forty seats don't make you an awful lot of money. Because the kitchen was behind the club there was no room for expansion, and we were kind of locked in. We did a little bit of advertising, but it was Dave's personality and talent that drew people in to the place. Even people who didn't know Dave and had never watched him at the piano were drawn in, because he was not only an incredible musician, he was an entertainer. He had a presence as well.

As his sickness took more and more of his time and he was getting weaker, he would bring other people in to play, and a lot of the community rallied around. One of the people who used to play was Ken Ward, and after Dave couldn't play any more, Ken took over the club. I've just carried you through five or six quick years here.

Every once in a while I would say to Dave, "This is not going to work." Cezanne might do \$500 a night on a good night but it would also do \$150 on a bad night, and why should we keep this thing open? But the place became so popular with Dave and with people that he'd bring in, that while I wasn't making any money it had a reputation growing, and people would call to see if they could play. And I thought that it added to the community. I still do. It's an east coast, old-city kind of place where you walk upstairs, turn right and come into a room where you're very close to the musicians. There aren't a lot of venues quite like that around.

Nonetheless, Houston doesn't go out during the week. If they know that there's no school tomorrow, by God, then they can go out and go around. When Charlie Byrd played not long ago the place was of course wall-to-wall and long waiting lines and everything, showing that there is a market if we can just touch it every once in a while. But Dave was the one who through his tenacity got all the musicians to come over and built the name up, so that these other musicians would want to come.

I was going to close it one time, and Tim Carman from the old Houston Post called and we had a long conversation. He said, "Well you know the place is just loved by everybody. How can you possibly close it?" I said, "I'm not. I'm going to keep it open, but this is not a moneymaking deal." I guess the positive side is that it gives us a room that we can use when

it's not being used, although that's not a frequent occasion. And most of the time it's just something different that's in the neighborhood that provides a diversion for this part of the city.

The only thing I might do that would change it is ... Having the kitchen on the second floor is a difficult thing, but we didn't have much selling space on the first floor. If we relocated down to the back where we have some transformers and air conditioning units and we moved the kitchen down to the first floor where it should be, then I would gut the kitchen and push the wall back, so that rather than forty seats we probably would have eighty seats. I don't think it should be any bigger than that. Dave had wanted to do that, but the economics were such that we just couldn't make any sense out of it then. But that would be the only change that we would make, and I think that that might allow us to expand it because when we do have name talents we just can't charge enough to get everybody so that they're financially happy at least.

Dave was just so enthusiastic. He believed, and you couldn't *NOT* believe with Catney selling you! There was "No problem", and "Don't worry, I've got a hand on it, and we're going to force this thing to success!" He was just energetic and he did it all. I had carried this thing for so long, and only a few seemed to care much about it, but it was the force of his personality and energy that just kept it open. There's no question in my mind I would have closed it had Dave not been there.

I learned through the grapevine that Dave was ill. Over time you could see it. Then he came to me one time during one of his remissions and said, "You know, I'm not feeling particularly good, and while I'm going to get better, here's what I think we should be doing ..." We took some time off. I think at the time we were opening three nights a week and we cut back to two nights. Since I had no talent in the booking area I told him I would fund what had to be funded but that I didn't have the talent or the interest in becoming knowledgeable in that area, to book the talent. So he and Linda would do all that, and even if Dave wasn't playing, other artists were coming in to do it.

There was no real question that Dave was the reason that Cezanne became what it's become, and Ken has done a good job on it. He picked it up because he thought that a place like this should continue. And he's not rolling in cash from this either. It's a labor of love, although we're working a little bit now on maybe expanding it for Wednesday and Thursday nights. We'd like to generate enough funds to do some better advertising and that kind of stuff. We're looking at a couple of programs right now with advertising and better signage and things.

I was always impressed with Dave's enthusiasm and his belief that it was going to be fine. It was always on the positive side. Even when he was at his sickest he had no problems--"This is just a momentary down, and I'll be back in a moment..."--that kind of thing. And to watch him when he got into one of his solo pieces... He kind of lost the fact that he was in a room with a lot of other people. He was concentrating and totally within himself when he was doing it, but he also entertained. He brought people over there and was a presence up there.

Dave rearranged the room several times trying to figure out the best place to be. The only thing I couldn't give him was more space, and that's what he really wanted for most of that time. We originally had different chairs--very expensive, nice chairs--but they were too damn big. So we cut back on the chair size, and that helped a bit.

I used to sit at the bar, and in fact the best place in the house is actually at the bar, because of the height.

