Crawford Grill

The Crawford Grill's story is difficult to follow. Race, politics, sports, and music veer off in multiple directions like jazz players lost in a midnight session, twisting, jabbing, and dodging notes before coming back together to make perfect sense—but only if you know how to listen.

Augustus “Gus” Greenlee moved to Pittsburgh from North Carolina in 1916 and became a cab driver and a shoe shiner—later a bootlegger and numbers runner. He opened the Crawford Grill as a speakeasy. Greenlee also owned the Pittsburgh Crawfords of Negro League baseball fame, emerging as a cultural and political powerhouse.

Soon, the Crawford Grill was an internationally renowned jazz club. Legends such as John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, and Sarah Vaughn regularly played to sell-out crowds, marking the Hill District one of the most vibrant African American communities outside of Harlem.

Butch Perkins knows these stories. Not because he owned the Grill. Or even played there. As an eight-year-old, he and three friends delivered almost 5,000 copies of the Pittsburgh Press to homes and businesses across the city’s Third Ward, including the Crawford Grill. That’s where he learned about jazz: he pulled his boyhood wagon up Elsmore Street to Crawford Grill’s side door and stood on stacked milk crates to get a better view of the action.
Perkins was not from a musical family, but the Hill District schooled him: early one morning, a local saxophone player hurrying through the streets explained to Perkins and his friends that John Coltrane had invited him to the Ellis Hotel for a lesson. The boys laughed at the very idea until they saw the great Coltrane himself, wearing a bathrobe, emerge from the hotel to greet the man. "We couldn't believe it," Perkins says. "We were jumping up and down. John Coltrane. That's the kind of stuff I got to experience."

The Crawford Grill was about more than the music though. "They had the best food," Perkins recalls. "They were known for that. Pure southern style, by the book. And lobsters. Steak. You name it."

The Grill drew a well-heeled crowd. Perkins once saw Roberto Clemente arrive by taxi. "Clemente's suit was emerald green," Perkins remembers. "Silk. Two white buttons. He had a straw hat that looked like it came from Brooks Brothers. Brown, reptile shoes."

Such encounters speak to the Crawford Grill's wider cultural significance. Clemente, for instance, wasn't alone. He exited the cab with Pittsburgh television news legend Bill Burns. "People might not remember it, but Bill Burns was a dresser," Perkins notes. "He had on a gray silk suit and a crisp white shirt, open at the collar."

Ethel Kennedy stopped in on a swing through Pittsburgh. So did Martin Luther King, Jr., and Frank Sinatra. Perkins says, "Everyone who was anyone went to the Crawford Grill."
What is most striking about Perkins's experience is that many would suppose him too young to have felt the Grill's influence. Gus Greenlee expanded the Crawford Grill to another location in 1943, then died in 1952. Eight-year-old Butch Perkins didn't take up his paper route until the early 1960s. By that time the club had moved to make way for the Civic Arena—part of an urban redevelopment plan many observers consider the Hill's death knell.

But the Hill's culture was deeply entrenched. Perkins still gets choked up talking about the neighborhood icons who nurtured his passion. People such as Walter Worthington, a literature, history, and theater buff who owned a local record store. "Walter Worthington schooled us," says Perkins. "He said, 'Let this jazz be an opening into other things.' He turned us onto authors. We were 11 years old, man. He had us reading W.E.B. DuBois, Ralph Ellison. He taught us to listen to period music when we were reading. It was like going to college at an early age."

By the time Perkins could patronize the Crawford Grill he had befriended Joe and Buzzy Robinson, the new father-son owners. But the Hill was in decline and jazz out of favor. Still, Perkin's passion for the larger culture of jazz continued. He took a job as caramel cooker at Clark, but continued collecting records.

In the early 1980s Perkins scored a gig as a jazz DJ on a local radio station. Armed with
new connections, he convinced Buzzy Robinson to let him start booking national jazz acts at the Crawford Grill again, a pursuit he followed until 1989. The Crawford Grill's paperboy helped put the club back on the map.

It might seem easier to be pessimistic about the future of jazz today. The Crawford Grill has closed. The (now) Mellon Arena's lonely gray parking lots occupy ground once home to Walter Worthington and Gus Greenlee. People no longer listen to jazz on the streets where Perkins once saw Dizzy Gillespie take all the money in an impromptu game of craps.

But the Crawford Grill's spirit lives on—in Dr. Nathan Davis, the renowned musician and educator who directs the University of Pittsburgh's Jazz Studies program; the school's Sonny Rollins International Jazz Archives; its International Academy of Jazz Hall of Fame.

It lives on in local clubs and bands. Perkins is especially fond of OPEK, an ambitious 10-15 piece ensemble tackling the work of visionary composer Sun Ra.

And then there is Perkins's apartment, which overlooks the arena. His walls are crammed with history books, photographs, and smatterings of his world-class jazz collection, which has swelled to more than 40,000 records.

Butch Perkins, who learned to listen to jazz—and everything it embodies—while delivering newspapers to the late, great Crawford Grill, keeps its memory abuzz.

1 All quotations from author interview with Butch Perkins, October 2006.
2 www.explorepahistory.com/hmarker.php?markerId=452
3 www.pitt.edu/~pittjazz/
4 www.clubcafelive.com;
    www.myspace.com/brilloboxevents;
    www.quietstormcoffee.com/calendar

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