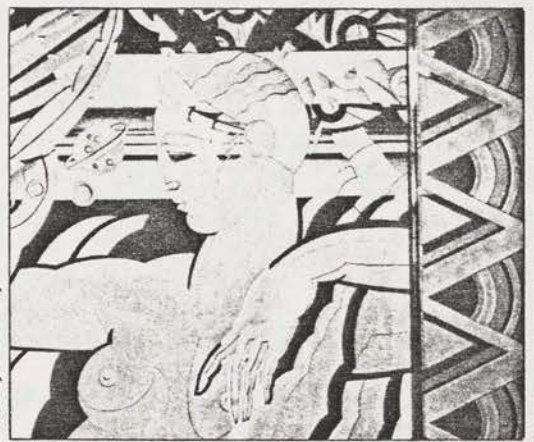


Photo by Glade Bilby



Interesting etched glass by New York designer Dennis Abbe decorates the Night and Day Lounge.

Restaurant Jonathan

Star Gazing Through Etched Glass

by Errol Laborde

It's been a secret but now it can be told. Last spring during the filming in Houston of "Urban Cowboy," John Travolta and friends would occasionally slip into a private plane and fly to New Orleans. Movie companies don't like for their talent to be galavanting in private aircraft during filming, but urban cowboys do what they want.

Travolta's plane would be met at New Orleans Lakefront Airport by Jack Cosner, a local architect/planner, restaurateur, Vieux Carre' Commission member, and celebrity buff. Later patrons and staff at Restaurant Jonathan would be whispering, "Isn't that John Travolta?" It was.

Through the years, only a very few local eateries have emerged as regular hangouts for the big shots that roll into town. Just by the magnitude of their names, the more famous local restaurants attract passers-through at least once; but some places have gone beyond that and

developed a steady following. During his vice-presidency, Spiro Agnew ate at Brennan's so often they named a shrimp dish after him. The clientele at Marti's can occasionally gawk at the likes of fixtures such as Tennessee Williams holding court from a corner table. And now there's Jonathan.

Tucked into the 700 block of North Rampart, Restaurant Jonathan is one of those places that seems like it's been around for at least as long as the 18th century relics that surround it. In fact, the restaurant is only four years old. It doesn't look its age. The two-story former townhouse building was constructed in 1825. The restaurant and lounge are appointed in a 1930ish Art Deco style. If Jonathan hasn't been around for long, it should have been.

There was a time, however, when it looked as though the restaurant wouldn't last as long as it has. Jonathan had an unhappy childhood. In the summer of 1977, the

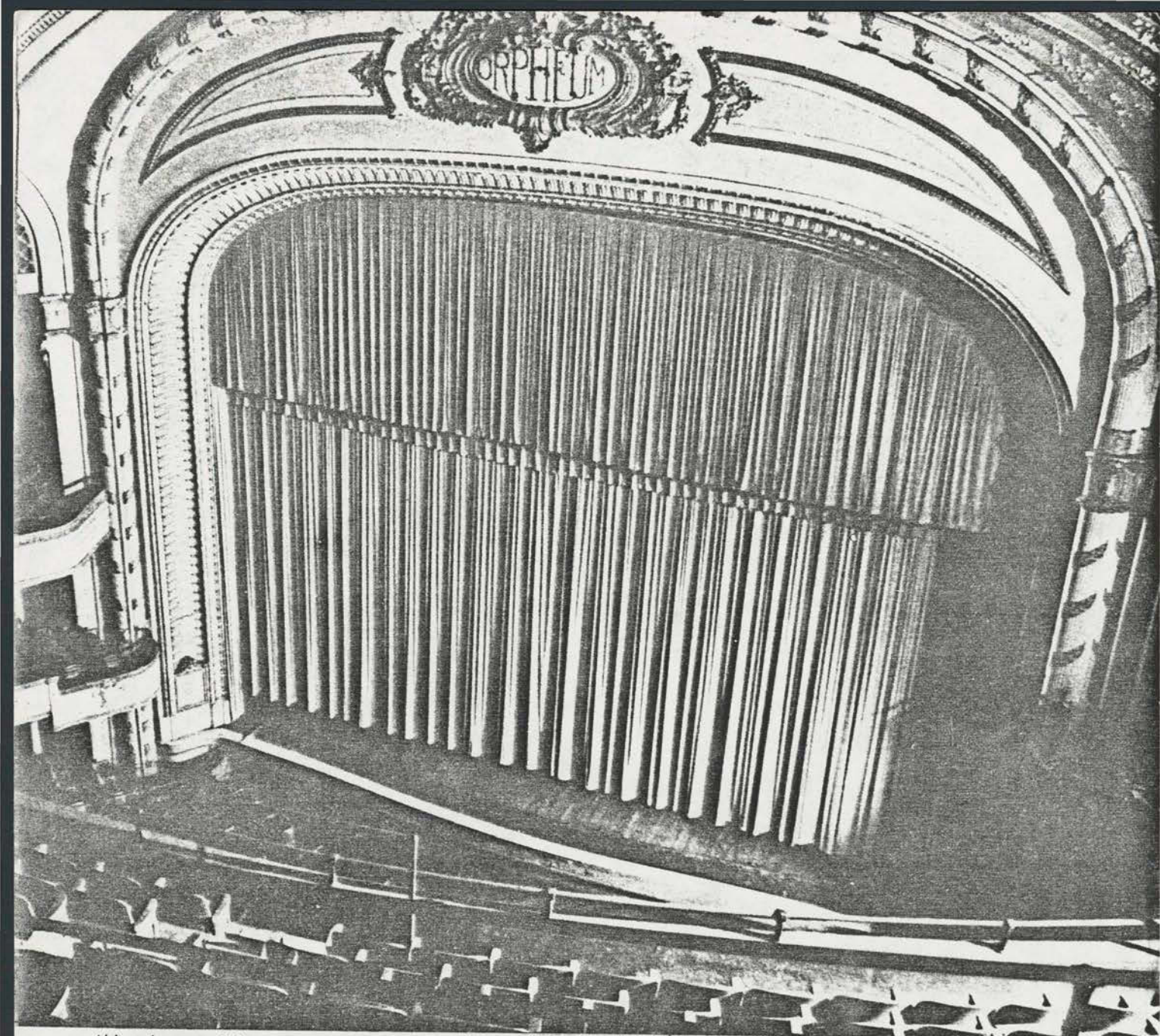
business closed suddenly. Gossip had it that Jonathan had died in the cradle. But Cosner, the place's founder and majority stockholder, insists that internal and external forces had merely made the patient ill. "The closing coincided with the complete uprooting of Rampart Street," Cosner explains. "The street was completely resurfaced, that's why the street can handle additional traffic now. We could no longer cope with the problem of people having to park on the other side of the street and having gangplanks coming into the restaurant.

"Also, we were at the time changing the kitchen. We had opened during a time when I was not as closely involved with the restaurant as I am now, with a kitchen staff that was not quite up to what I thought our standards should be.

"Fortunately, about that time I had the good fortune to meet Tom Cowman, our present chef. He felt he

Photo by Glade Bilby





Although some of the paint is peeling, the almost acoustically-perfect Orpheum is still a beautiful facility.



Orpheum Manager Asa Booksh (above) has seen the Orpheum prosper and suffer through good and bad years since 1933. (At right) Maintenance supervisor Richard McCormick, left, shows off the Orpheum to musician Gregory Miller, chairman of the symphony's Orchestra Committee.



Photos by John Maher



Cosner plays host to superstar Liza Minnelli.

The Erte Salon (left) showcases the restaurant's Art Deco theme. Cosner selected the decor because of an inadequate representation of that period in New Orleans' interiors.



John Travolta, a personal friend of owner Jack Cosner, often wings into the city to visit Restaurant Jonathan.

needed at least two months to get his thinking together and for us to discuss the concept of the restaurant and what type of place we wanted it to be, and the kind of food we wanted to serve. So we just used the time when we would have been practically inoperative anyway, because of the street, to get ourselves together. We re-opened in September 1977, and it's been quite satisfactory ever since."

That reopening began the second phase in the life of a restaurant that practically started as a neighborhood renewal project. Cosner purchased the buildings across from his home on Orleans Street with plans to bring some business back to the fringe of the Quarter. The new restaurant eventually affected not only the neighborhood but Cosner's career as well. "Originally, people were going to be hired to run the place," Cosner recalls. "But not after a couple of nice conversations with people like Ella Brennan, who was very helpful in

giving me a lot of advice. She said, 'If you want something to be right, you have to stay on top of it and operate it yourself.'"

With the help of a general manager and a staff of 60, Cosner operates a restaurant that in its manner of re-creating the 1930s Art Deco style is the epitome of elegance. The owner speaks of the interior decorating of his business with an architect's passion.

"People are very stimulated by this design. June Allyson came here three or four times because it's theatrical, it's Hollywood—it turns people on. Plus Deco is something that's unique to New Orleans.

"There's a certain similarity," Cosner continues, "about many of the restaurants here. That similarity is very lovely. That's what New Orleans has made its reputation on—the 'New Orleans look' with the exposed brick

and the cypress. This restaurant provides another view. New Orleans was certainly flourishing in the 1920s and '30s just like the other cities were, yet when Deco went out of fashion here, it really went out. There's no public interior left that really capitalizes on this period other than a couple of bank lobbies. So this is one of the only places that's open to the public where people can experience the ambiance of the 1920s and '30s.

"Deco is also a style that, as opposed to Art Nouveau, is a little bit easier to recreate. It's angular rather than curvilinear and obviously straight lines are easier to recreate than curved lines. Plus, at the time I started collecting things for the restaurant, the new interest in Art Deco hadn't peaked, certainly not in the South."

For those who skipped too many art appreciation classes, Deco is the streamlined style often associated with early Hollywood. Cosner is



As a reminder of Muhammad Ali's visit to the restaurant, his prose and art proudly hang from the Men's Room wall.

Art Deco art and artifacts, such as the clock, (top center) from an upstairs dining room, were collected in London, New York, Washington, and Houston.

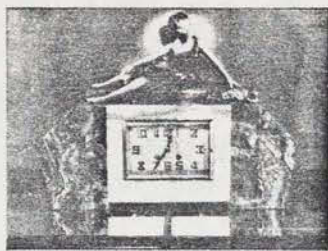


Photo by Glade Bibby



Rex Reed is one of the celebrities who can be frequently spotted at Jonathan.

Men of fashion such as designer Chester Weinberg (left) feel right at home among the Art Deco treasures.

careful that the association doesn't get muddled: "There's a difference between what's called Hollywood Deco and just plain Deco. At one point I was going to do Hollywood Deco, which is what people think of when they think of Jean Harlow—lots of white satin and mirrors. I had the opportunity to do that. Frankly, it would have been somewhat less expensive because it would have been literally like a movie set and consequently not the real thing. But when I began looking around—both in this country and abroad—for pieces for the restaurant, I found that there were still things from the period that were available that were affordable. They were affordable then, certainly not now. I shudder at the thought of trying to redo this restaurant. So, I thought we could be a bit more realistic."

As he spoke, Cosner was seated at a side table in the first floor lounge. With paternal pride, he pointed to the objects d'art that enrich that room alone; the sleek very Deco chandelier was designed by Cosner and constructed in New York; both sconces on the outside wall are signed by an artist of the period, Sabino of Paris; the fan mirror came from an estate in New Jersey; an urn on the piano is from Hungary; and the early 1920s piano was owned by Cosner's mother in Lake Charles. The piano is the one slight deviation from the Deco period. It predates the art form

but has since been lacquered to match the bar's Deco period color scheme.

A few evenings later the surroundings were getting a close inspection. It was near closing time on a Wednesday night. Toward the front side of the piano, five people sat around a table: three men, two women—all chic, all beautiful. One of the men leaned over to press his hand on the carpet, another watched. Yep, the carpet was thick. The conversation shifted. A fashion meeting that one had attended had been the best ever staged in the South, unfortunately the attendance had been disappointing. A sixth person enters. He has been exploring. Some of the woodwork is lined with goldleaf. "That's made with real gold!" he exclaims. Apart from the group, a lone blonde examines the display case beneath the aquariums on the inside wall. She's amused by the brass monkey cigarette holder and stunned by the wedding invitation preserved in a silver Deco frame. She re-reads it carefully:

*Mr. & Mrs. Marino Bello
request the pleasure of your company
at the marriage reception of their daughter
Jean Harlow
and
Mr. Paul Bern
on Sunday, the third of July
at three o'clock in the afternoon.
Ninety-eight-twenty Easton Drive
Beverly Hills, California*

Please reply

In the center of the case is another silver frame. This one embraces a picture of what seems to be another 1930s movie star. It's a male with short cropped hair and a serious expression. A white scarf dangles from his neck. The blonde looks closely. It's John Travolta.

Denied those who stay in the lounge is a glance of the elegance in the dining rooms with the glass enclosed wine closet and the prints by Deco artist Erte. Abbe, a New York artist, did some of the surrounding mural and glass work. Denied to approximately half of the clientele is a chance to read the framed scribbled message hanging in the first floor Gentlemen's Room. It reads: "To Jack Cosner from Muhammed Ali, three time heavyweight boxing champion of the world. Your food is the greatest and I will be back some day. Sept. 16-19-78." Around his proclamation, the champ had drawn an outline of a boxing glove. In place of the word "world," Ali had actually sketched a planet complete with penciled scratches for continents. The ring around the planet makes it look more like Saturn than earth, but had Ali been an astronomer instead of a boxer, his doodles wouldn't be hanging from restaurant walls.

In spite of its glitter, Cosner is concerned about Jonathan being portrayed as exclusive or eccentric. "I wouldn't want for anyone to get the impression that our clientele is of one



Pianist Bobby Short poses with Erte, an Art Deco master, whose art is displayed at Restaurant Jonathan.

Through the years Jack Cosner, (right) cultivated friendships with celebrities who now visit his restaurant whenever they are in town.



Rock Hudson (above) can be counted on to turn a few heads whenever he pops into Jonathan.



Leontine Price (top right) dines at the restaurant whenever she's in the city.

Photo by Glade Bilby II

kind or another or of one economic strata or another," he pleads. "If you'll notice on our menu, the prices are no different than in any of the other what they call 'white tablecloth restaurants' in New Orleans."

Under Chef Cowman, the food has improved to the point that the restaurant has received the Mobil four star rating and plaudits by *Travel/Holiday Magazine*. The menu, which could be described as being continental-Creole, is changed seasonally, four times a year, to take advantage of what's on the market and to keep the creative juices sizzling among the chefs. On the summer menu, entree prices ranged from \$10.75 to \$39 for Chateaubriand en Bouquetiere for two.

But as good as the food may be, the celebrity hunting adds a little extra spice. Dick Cavett dines at Jonathan everytime he's in town—usually at least once a year. The urbane wit is a close enough friend of Cosner's that he once allowed himself to be interviewed as part of a radio commercial for the restaurant. His easily identifiable voice spoke of the virtues of Jonathan but then teased, "don't use my name." (Note: In an interview I once did with Cavett, I asked him about the "mystery" voice in the Jonathan commercial. He responded, "Don't you know who that was, it was Greta Garbo.")

Leontine Price is another fan of the place, as is Mitzi Gaynor. An

autographed poster of the latter hangs outside Cosner's office.

"I would say that virtually everyone who comes to town who is a 'celebrity' comes here," Cosner suggests. "One reason is that I have a particular interest in theatrical and musical performing artists. I know quite a few. You only need to know two or three people like John Travolta, who is a close personal friend of mine, to know that if he hears of people coming to New Orleans, he'll tell them, 'be sure to go to Jonathan.' With people like Travolta and Leontine Price, it doesn't take long for the word to spread."

Another reason the stars cluster around the restaurant may be that management is sensitive to their privacy. Instead of tipping off gossip writers and other news people about celestial arrivals, the owner keeps the visits unannounced and discreet. For the same reason, there are few photographs available of famous folks filing the mignon at Jonathan.

Cosner's fascination with the fascinating pre-dates his entry into the restaurant game. When earlier films were being shot in New Orleans he would make a point of sending a card or flowers to the visiting performers. He recalls finding Natalie Wood "with nothing to do" quite accessible when she was in

town for "This Property is Condemned."

According to Rock Hudson, yet another visitor to the restaurant and friend of the owner, that fascination also exists among stars. Cosner related the story told by Hudson about a personal experience right after he first made a name for himself in the flicks. Hudson was walking down a street in Hollywood when he noticed another up-and-coming celebrity walking down the opposite side of the street. The two continued to stare at each other obviously delighted to see the other in person. To this day, Rock Hudson savors that first encounter with Elvis Presley.

Politicians have also made the scene at Jonathan. Dutch Morial had a dinner there the night of his inauguration as mayor, and Moon Landrieu stops by occasionally. California Governor Jerry Brown has also dined amidst the Deco. Since Cosner owns a second home north of San Francisco, and is thus a taxpayer in that state, he is in effect a partial constituent of Brown's. As an act of public service or friendship or both, Cosner even accompanied his half-Governor to the airport.

Was Linda Ronstadt with him? "No," Cosner revealed, "but his first call at the airport was to Linda."

Exactly what the Guv told his girl friend remains a state secret, but perhaps he called to spread the word that if ever she goes to New Orleans, she should be sure to go to Jonathan. ♣