

The Crystal Ballroom's renowned dance floor, which floats three stories above West Burnside, has been a grand stage for music, dancing and personalities which helped define an era—several of them, in fact. But the true essence of this extraordinary place is a tangle of first loves, police raids, hallucinogenic visions, and passion-filled performances by a host of America's greatest. From smoldering silent screen stars to Beat poets, from Merle Haggard to Little Richard to Sonic Youth. The place narrowly escaped death by fire, demolition, and neglect, and has survived to earn its listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

During the 'teens and '20s, at the height of the Jazz Age, a man named Montrose Ringler reigned as Portland's dance hall king. He owned numerous venues, but the crown jewel of his "empire" was the Crystal Ballroom (which he originally called Cotillion Hall.) Ringler first threw open its decorative doors in January of 1914.

Ringler's Cotillion Hall initially received much praise and patronage, but at the time Jazz music was the focus of intense



scrutiny by some of the more conservative elements in society. Reform-minded leaders led by Lola Baldwin, the country's first staff police woman, crusaded to rid public halls and, specifically, jazz dancing from the city. Stifling

regulations were passed, dance steps banned, and, amazingly, a standardized dance position was imposed from which no one was permitted to stray. To enforce the latter, a dance hall inspector made the rounds of all the city's public ballrooms.

Ringler succeeded in sidestepping the anti-dance ordinances for a time by opening less

formal halls—and even a dance barge called *Blue Bird*—outside of the city's jurisdiction. Lola and her somber contingent battled back, however, and with a series of arrests and a

spate of damning news stories, Ringler lost his crown and the Ballroom in the early 20's. In contrast (or perhaps as a backlash) to the initial controversial jazz period, the mid-20's ushered in much more family-oriented fare, featuring the square dance calls of the ballroom's new manager, 75-year-old Dad Watson. Amazingly, thousands of Portlanders' decided to forego the Charleston, a jazz step then sweeping the nation, to come to the Crystal and dance as their grandparents had. From the late 20s onward, Dad Watson's Old-Time Dance programs packed the house.



Ringler's Cotillion Hall, c. 1915.

(OHS # OrHi 11744)

Even when the economic crisis of the 30s intensified greatly, attendance at Dad Watson's events remained high. People seemed to be attracted to the cooperative and uplifting spirit inherent in the old social dances.

A casket-maker named Ralph Farrier continued Dad's old-style, uplifting type of dance after Watson's passing. Through the chaotic times of WWII, civil rights battles and atomic fears, Farrier's Crystal Ballroom remained a predictable, safe harbor for families to congregate. Farrier succeeded in barring the raucous strains of the jitterbug and rebellious rock 'n' roll "noise" for many years, but by the early 60s the popularity of square dancing waned and "old-time" music was viewed as, well, old.

To boost sagging revenues, young entrepreneurs introduced new blood to the Ballroom's staid program. Colorful Gypsy ceremonies and blistering R & B concerts set a new tone for the long-tame place. The energy incited by the Gypsy brass bands and legendary performers such as James Brown,

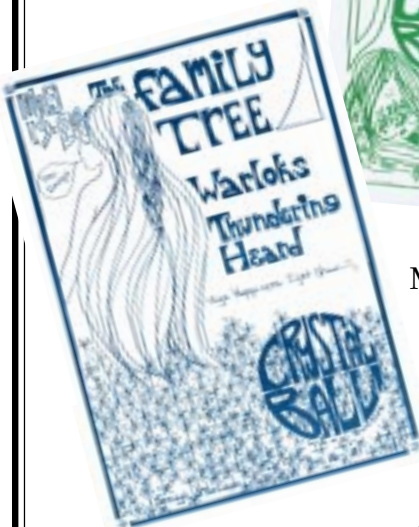
June 1968, just 18 months after its launch, the Crystal's psychedelic manifestation was cut short because of the over-30 crowd's great concern for the city's "misguided" youth.

From the 70s to the mid 90s the ballroom continued to tower over Burnside, but its energy went underground. For years, a number of squatters, artists and bohemians lived here and used the place as a studio. Occasionally, huge private parties were held and bands played to large, invite-only crowds. While no longer a public space, the Ballroom continued to thrive. The artists who lived and worked here both tapped the energy of the place and gave it sustenance.

After a near 30-year respite the grand old hall returned to public life in 1997 with McMenamins as its new custodian. The ground floor, for decades occupied by an auto dealership and then the Culver Glass Company, is now transformed into an astonishing pub and restaurant. Named after the King of Dance himself, Ringlers is anchored

by an eye-popping bar, gloriously enhanced by ceramic tile artistry. Along with a brewery, a new dance floor was created on the second level, named playfully for the conduct crusader and early Ballroom nemesis, Lola Baldwin. The Ballroom on the third floor is, of course, the building's centerpiece. At the time of its construction the patented dance floor was said to be the only one of its kind on the Pacific Coast. Today, it is likely the only one left in the United States.

While on McMenamins' watch the Ballroom's legendary energy rematerialized in all its glory. The place is over 90 years old but the sensation it generates is as fresh as it's ever been. With its remarkable floating dance floor, corner stage and curving balcony still intact and pulsing, the place remains one of the most fun and unique places to waltz, swing, pogo or shake your tail-feather. Or perhaps you just want to come by and dip your toe in the ever-growing, swift moving river of energy that continuously washes through the place. Of course, we recommend full immersion, but that's your choice. Either way, a visit is sure to restore that spring in your step!



Marvin Gaye and the Ike & Tina Turner Revue definitely blew out any cobwebs that had formed in the old dance hall.

Then, in 1967, the Crystal was reborn as Portland's psychedelic palace, essentially a Fillmore Northwest. Although fleeting, this part of the Crystal's history has achieved legendary status because of the awesome "soundtrack" provided by top bands of the day, including the Grateful Dead, the Electric Prunes, the Weeds, Buffalo Springfield, and Blue Cheer. In