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“Jive That Anybody Can Dig:”

**Lavada “Dr. Hepcat” Durst and the Desegregation of Radio in Central
Texas, 1948-1963**

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Texas, 1948-1963**

by

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Report

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to anyone who works to honor the past, present or future of Austin's African American community. As Eva Lindsey says, "it's going to take more than folklore."

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Abstract

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

Supervisor: Karl Hagstrom Miller

Lavada “Dr. Hepcat” Durst was the first African American popular music disc jockey in Texas. His radio program *The Rosewood Ramble* was broadcast on Austin station KVET-1300 AM from 1948 until 1963. KVET’s white owners, who included future Texas politicians John Connally and J. J. “Jake” Pickle, were not outspoken advocates for the rights of African Americans under Jim Crow, but they hired Durst in a concentrated effort to expand KVET’s African American listening audience. *The Rosewood Ramble* became a cultural, economic, and psychological resource for black radio listeners in segregated central Texas while also becoming the region’s most popular radio show among white listeners. This paper uses a mixture of oral history and archival sources to argue that Durst’s fifteen-year career at KVET was only the best-known part of a lifetime spent as an information broker to Austin’s embattled black community.

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Photo of Lavada Durst, station KVET (Austin, Texas), LAB General Photograph Collection, Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland.

“Hey there chappies. H’lo, chicks. You’ve latched on to the Rosewood Ramble with your music recorded. It’s a real gone deal that I’m gonna wheel, so stand by while I pad your skulls.”¹

Lavada “Dr. Hepcat” Durst delivered this monologue over the mellow strains of a Duke Ellington instrumental every weeknight from the summer of 1948 until 1963. It provided the overture to his rhythm & blues radio program *The Rosewood Ramble* on KVET-1300 AM in Austin, Texas. His voice, at first shocking to members of white and black communities alike, soon became a fixture of the sonic landscape of post-World War II central Texas. His words, the first ever spoken by a black secular music deejay on Texas airwaves, signaled to the listener that he or she had entered a space where the South’s traditional rules of African American deference were suspended, where a bold, boastful black voice could ring out from car radios and whisper sweet nothings into the most private corners of one’s home. The title of the Ellington track playing underneath, “Things Ain’t What They Used To Be,” could suggest either a nostalgia for the past or a celebration of the present. On the night of Dr. Hepcat’s first broadcast, Austin’s radio listeners likely shook their heads in disbelief, some in delight, some in dismay, but all in agreement that a new era had begun. Things weren’t what they used to be.

The desegregation of Austin’s airwaves was driven not by activism but by financial interest. Fledgling radio station KVET hired Lavada Durst at a time when the future of American broadcasting was uncertain. With television ownership on the rise, radio stations across the country were eager to prove to advertisers that their medium was still relevant. One of their strategies was to seek out new sets of listeners, and a handful

¹ David Isay, “Dr. Hepcat,” in *Holding On: Dreamers, Visionaries, Eccentrics and other American Heroes* (Newton, NJ: Shanachie Entertainment, 2005), Radio Documentary.

of stations in the Jim Crow South decided that focusing on racial and ethnic minority audiences was their best chance for survival. KVET's white owners were no social progressives, but they brought in Lavada Durst to, in his words, "put on a program and beam it directly to black people."² Durst's vast knowledge of contemporary African American music, combined with his mastery of the rhythmic, rhyming banter known as jive talk, soon made *The Rosewood Ramble* the most popular radio program in Austin. KVET's surprised owners gladly reaped the financial benefits, but they nonetheless remained uneasy about Durst's presence at their station.

Durst himself was more businessman than race activist, a savvy entrepreneur who literally talked his way into mainstream broadcasting. Always dressed in colorful sport coats, ties and a porkpie hat, Durst was different from the black professionals and academics whose wealth and respectability had earned them influence with Austin's white officials earlier in the century.³ Durst also had little in common with his contemporaries Arthur DeWitty and Booker T. Bonner, political activists who openly challenged Jim Crow's hold in Austin. Durst stood between two eras of black activism and belonged to neither of them. A reluctant pioneer, he lived at a time when the effects of America's involvement in World War II created a moment of economic opportunity – albeit it limited – for African Americans. He used his entrepreneurial talent to become East Austin's foremost communicator, building a career at the intersections of music, sports, religion, advertising and teaching. The thing that linked all of his ventures was his

² Cheryl Coggins Frink, "Dr. Hepcat's Jive Shattered Barrier of All-White Radio: 'Soul-bending, Soul-sending' Later Gave Way to Soul-saving," *Austin American-Statesman*, March 8, 1987, A14.

³ Author's interview with Ron Chandler, November 16th, 2010, Austin, TX. Unless otherwise noted, all interviews were conducted by the author.

talk: cool and seductive, positive and reassuring, it gave him the power to traverse different spaces within and without Austin's black community at a time when there were real risks for doing so. Durst was a bridge between postwar Austin's east and west, white and black, young and old, sacred and secular, and cultural and political worlds.

Lavada Durst's story also complicates our understanding of the role of business in the long civil rights movement. In most narratives white-owned businesses appear as opponents of change: lunch counters that refused to desegregate or department stores that refused to let African Americans try on clothing. Rarely does one read about business owners in the Jim Crow South making public deals across the color line. However, successful entrepreneurs tend to be comfortable with calculated risk, and in this sense they have something in common with civil rights activists who were willing risk arrest or bodily harm to end Jim Crow. In both business and politics, success requires an ability to balance liabilities against potential payoffs. When Durst and KVET co-founder John Connally shook hands in 1948, they knew they could face consequences for disturbing the status quo in segregated Austin. However, each also knew that the payoff could be significant: for KVET, tapping into an underserved radio market could keep the station afloat; for Durst, radio could provide both an income and an opportunity to use his unique skill set for the benefit of his underserved community.

Communications scholars Tom McCourt and Eric Rothenbuhler use Lavada Durst's story to make arguments about structural change in the postwar American radio industry.⁴ Cultural historians Nelson George and William Barlow focus on the influence

⁴ Eric Rothenbuhler and Tom McCourt, "Radio Redefines Itself, 1947-1962," in *Radio Reader: Essays on the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 367-71.

of Durst's radio jive upon subsequent generations of radio broadcasters.⁵ These are important, national stories. But the local histories – of the marginalized East Austin neighborhood in which Durst grew up, of his path to radio, and of the lifelong work he did to sustain black family life – have largely been unwritten. Radio was not a wholly separate part of Durst's career; it was only the most visible (or audible) part of a life spent as an information broker to a community with a history of geographic and psychological isolation. Durst played multiple roles in the upkeep of an independent black Austin: advertiser, youth athletic director, sportscaster, clergyman, performing musician, agent, booker, promoter, and songwriter. He was an ordained Baptist minister who gave up music for God, then returned to it in the final decade of his life. He was a father of two, a grandfather of many, and a surrogate father to thousands more through his work in the parks, churches and schools. I seek to situate his work at KVET within this larger picture.

There is no surviving recording of *The Rosewood Ramble*.⁶ There are also very few formal histories of Austin's black community.⁷ To assemble a more complete picture of what Dr. Hepcat sounded like – and of his life and careers outside the deejay booth – I relied on recorded interviews with Durst and on interviews I performed with those who

⁵ Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 43; William Barlow, *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 93.

⁶ Durst said he was unaware of any recordings of his show. See Ruth Ellsworth interview with Lavada Durst, May 18th, 1978, Austin, Texas; John Wheat interview with Lavada Durst, 1986, Austin, Texas.

⁷ See Anthony Orum, *Power, Money, & the People: The Making of Modern Austin* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1987); Dwonna Goldstone, *Integrating the 40 Acres: The Fifty Year Struggle for Racial Equality at the University of Texas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006); Albert Arthur Allison, *To Defy The Monster* (New York: iUniverse, 2005); Martha Norkunas, Project in Interpreting the Texas Past and the African American Texans Oral History Project, both unpublished oral histories.

knew him and/or listened to his program. For descriptions of East Austin during his lifetime, I used both my own interviews and secondary sources that employed oral history as their primary methodology. Thus, much of this project is based in memory, in some cases recalled many years after the fact. This methodology is not without its pitfalls, but it offers the reward of documenting pieces of a past that would otherwise be lost. It was the only way to get an idea of the *Ramble* sounded like, of what Ernie's Chicken Shack smelled like, of how it felt to be a teenager at a Dr. Hepcat-deejayed dance in Rosewood Park on a sweltering summer night.

Memory alone, says activist Eva Lindsey, is not enough to save East Austin. She argues that it will take “more than folklore” to stop the bulldozers of gentrification and urban redevelopment that are steadily erasing the Austin black community's past and its present.⁸ Lindsey wrote the application for historic landmark status that saved the Victory Grill from demolition in the 1990s. In the process, she learned that citing scholarly publications mentioning your endangered location is the best way to secure its preservation. The collective memory of African Americans, she says, is too easily dismissed by white policymakers. It must be legitimated, turned into history, before it can be wielded as a political weapon. And in many ways, Durst himself was a legitimator: he used his position at KVET to bring elements of African American vernacular culture to the mainstream, where they could – and did - become part of white Austin's history, too. Many Austinites, both black and white, disapproved of the culture that Durst was celebrating. But even their disapproval was an acknowledgement of his power to shape their city's identity.

⁸ Interview with Eva Lindsey, November 15th, 2010, Austin, TX.

The Rosewood Ramble was a cultural resource that encouraged Austinites to imagine themselves as living within a new postwar America; Austin radio listeners came face-to-face for the first time with jive talk and rhythm and blues music, cultural forms that owe their existence to the rapidly changing geographic and economic position of African Americans between World War I and World War II.⁹ Even if the most rapid developments for blacks were happening in places far from Austin, Dr. Hepcat could beam their emergent musical expression directly into any home within range of KVET's 35-mile broadcast signal.¹⁰

The Rosewood Ramble was also an economic resource that linked black and white, urban and rural, and sacred and secular communities much further afield than 35 miles. Durst's on-air promotion of black music helped put Austin on the Chitlin' Circuit, an informal corridor of African American performance venues that stretched from New York to Texas. The Circuit created economic opportunities not only for musicians but for entrepreneurs in the communities in which they lived. East Austin's thriving culture industry of the 1950s kept black dollars within the black community, and it also started an eastward flow of young whites eager to experience live the music they heard on Durst's program.

Most importantly, however, *The Rosewood Ramble* was a psychological resource for black Austin during Jim Crow. Durst addressed individual black central Texans in a way that broadcast media had never done, affirming their value as listeners while placing white listeners for the first time on the outside of a mainstream media discourse. As

⁹ See George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, 19; Preston Lauterbach, *The Chitlin Circuit and the Road to Rock and Roll* (New York: Norton, 2011), 103.

¹⁰ The KVET broadcast radius varied based on weather conditions and time of broadcast. Interview with Ron Chandler; Interview with John Hanson, November 16th, 2010, Austin, TX.

Huston-Tillotson College's Dean emeritus of fine arts and music Dr. Beulah Agnes Curry Jones puts it, Dr. Hepcat's jive technique made his program "a two-way street... he was talking to you with phraseology that made you feel acknowledged."¹¹ For once, black listeners were not made to feel that they were eavesdropping on a conversation between others, or to rephrase W.E.B DuBois' famous formulation of double consciousness, "[hearing] oneself through the [ears] of others." In this way, Dr. Hepcat provided not only a cultural and economic bridge between Austin's east and west, its white and black worlds, but also a psychological bridge between the words "black" and "Austinite."¹² He offered an identity to young black radio listeners that was based on participation in emergent, nationwide black cultural expressions; as it happened, many young whites gravitated towards this identity as well.

In 1870, African Americans made up 36.5% of Austin's population.¹³ That was the highest proportion of the total that the black community ever reached. Its share fell steadily since then, with larger drops from 1880 to 1890 and from 1910 to 1920. These were the decades when lynching in Texas reached peak levels. In 1885, an estimated twenty-two mobs lynched forty-three people statewide. In the second decade, which encompasses Lavada Durst's birth in 1913, the onset of World War I saw a revival of the Ku Klux Klan, and the number of lynchings in Texas more than doubled from prewar levels. For the black Texas families that did not migrate north, the memory and threat of

¹¹ Interview with Dr. Beulah Agnes Curry Jones, October 28th, 2011, Austin, TX.

¹² W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, first published 1903), 12. For more on double consciousness and black radio listening to shows like Amos n' Andy, see Michelle Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 93-94.

¹³ U.S. Census.

racial violence were constant presences.¹⁴ “It was instilled in me, stay away from those white folks,” Durst later said. “They’ll tell a lie on you and get you hung.”¹⁵

For most of Austin’s history, to “know one’s place” carried both geographic and behavioral meanings, and to transgress those boundaries carried very real risks.¹⁶ In 1928, Austin city officials hired Dallas architectural firm Koch and Fowler to draw up a plan for Austin’s growth. One of the plan’s first recommendations was to relocate the city’s spread-out African American population into an area “east of East Avenue and south of the city cemetery” to make room for more desirable west side development.¹⁷ The problem was, Koch and Fowler admitted, that “this problem cannot be solved legally under any zoning law known to us at present. Practically all attempts of such have been proven unconstitutional.”¹⁸ Clarksville and Wheatville, two neighborhoods on Austin’s west side established by emancipated slaves after the Civil War, were in 1928 still largely filled with black property owners. The city council’s solution was to deny these residents municipal services if they did not willingly vacate. Instead of picking up black homeowners’ garbage, trucks dumped the city’s garbage in front of their houses.¹⁹ Strategies like these proved effective. The 1940 census shows that seventy-five percent of Austin’s black residents lived on the East side.²⁰ Thus, one of the first steps in Austin’s redefinition as a modern city was to make black bodies invisible to middle-class whites,

¹⁴ John R. Ross, “Lynching,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jgl01>. Accessed November 15th, 2011.

¹⁵ Wheat interview with Durst.

¹⁶ Interview with Dr. Beulah Agnes Curry Jones. Dr. Jones said that many people couldn’t believe that she grew up on Red River Street “because it’s not far enough east.”

¹⁷ Koch and Fowler, *A City Plan for Austin, Texas* (1928), 57. George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural Center, Austin, TX.

¹⁸ Orum, 175-176.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 175.

²⁰ U.S. Census.

sequestering them into space that could be ignored and underfunded for the next half century.²¹

A few black neighborhoods in other parts of the city persisted on into the twentieth century, namely Clarksville to the west, St. John's to the north, and South Mary to the south across the Colorado River. But the center of black life during Lavada Durst's lifetime was unquestionably the East side, and its residents came to view the Clarksville and St. John's families as lower-class and poorer.²² Dr. Curry Jones remembers (and regrets) making fun of her classmates from St. John's who were bused to E. H. Anderson High School on the East side in the 1940s.²³

The majority of Austin's black residents were in the employ of whites. They crossed East Avenue each morning to work as maids, cooks, and groundskeepers in white residential neighborhoods like Hyde Park and West Enfield. Some worked as janitors for downtown department stores like J. C. Penney's and E. H. Scarboroughs, while others were porters at hotels like the Driskill and Stephen F. Austin. The city's electric streetcars, which operated from 1891 to 1940, had a hub at the corner of Congress Avenue and East 6th Street.²⁴ As black workers returned home in the evening from various sections of the city, they were all forced to get off at the corner and wait for the one car that would take them to the East side. Since no downtown business would allow

²¹ For the east side's ongoing isolation from sources of "economic well-being, civic pride, and environmental meaning" in Austin, see Andrew Busch, "Natural City: The Unresolved Dialectic of Race, Economy, and Environment in Austin, 1955-1975," University of Texas at Austin, unpublished paper, 5.

²² Orum, 186.

²³ Interview with Dr. Beulah Agnes Curry Jones.

²⁴ A. T. Jackson, "Austin's Streetcar Era," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Oct., 1954), 235-248.

them to use the restroom, they were at times forced to urinate or even defecate in the alleys between buildings.²⁵

Not all black Austinites depended upon whites for their income, however. Minority entrepreneurs, shut out of Austin's downtown business sector, created an informal economy to meet the demands of their community. When Durst was a young man, a walk down Austin's East 6th street was like stepping into a smaller version of New York's Lower East Side.²⁶ Black, Hispanic, Jewish and Middle Eastern shopkeepers offered their goods and services to white, black and brown customers. Jewish clothiers and dry goods merchants had begun arriving in Austin around the turn of the century, and they had done business with African Americans from the start. Jonas Silberstein's store at 305 East 6th St. was one of the few places in the city where blacks could try on clothing before they bought it. As one ventured further east along East 6th Street, immigrant-owned businesses gave way to almost exclusively black- and Tejano-owned ones. African American dentist Dr. Everett Givens practiced at 419 1/2 East 6th, and black undertaker William Tears had his mortuary at #615. The street would retain its identity as a minority business district until the 1970s; this was the commercial strip where Lavada Durst would hone his verbal advertising skills in the 1930s and 1940s.²⁷

The East side's entrepreneurs operated on the margins of the city's white business sector, and consequently some of the services they provided blurred the lines of legality. Often, these were the services that most enticed whites to cross East Avenue. Until his death in 1932, black entrepreneur Nathan W. Rhambo owned a funeral parlor and a burial

²⁵ Orum, 184.

²⁶ *ibid*, 177.

²⁷ *ibid*, 180.

insurance company, while he also ran the East side's "policy," or numbers game. He reportedly employed Huston and Tillotson professors as accountants for both his legal and extralegal activities. His ascension to the post of treasurer in the Texas Negro Undertakers Association allowed him to extend his numbers racket across central Texas. Meanwhile, his brother Perry C. Rhambo was one of the East side's biggest landowners, and he operated the neighborhood's most successful barbershop in addition to several bordellos.²⁸ Perry had been a porter at the Stephen F. Austin Hotel in the early 1920s, where he also was a pimp to the white clientele, until he bought a house in East Austin and opened his first brothel. Bootleggers and cowboys rubbed shoulders with statehouse lobbyists, politicians, and university students.²⁹

The Rhambos' business ventures do not appear to have kept them from becoming respected and influential citizens. East Austin was only five square miles, and virtue and vice had to exist in close proximity. Nathan and Perry Rhambo gave generously to the Ebenzer Third Baptist Church and the Rising Star Baptist Church.³⁰ In the wake of a 1918 Ku Klux Klan rally at the Texas Capitol, Nathan Rhambo was named to a Welfare and Advisory Board charged with keeping "in intimate touch with the varied interest of the colored people of Austin..." and reporting monthly to the Austin city council.³¹ While little came of the board's recommendations, its membership roll provided a virtual who's who of black Austin that included Rhambo's fellow mortician William Tears, physician Dr. W. H. Crawford, and dentist Dr. Everett Givens. In 1928 the Welfare and Advisory board finally secured \$14,000 for the construction of a park for the black community.

²⁸ For land ownership, see Orum, 182, 187.

²⁹ Allison, 3.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 3.

³¹ Orum, 191.

Named Rosewood Park, it would soon become the center of young black life in Austin and the place where Lavada Durst's daytime and nighttime careers would intersect.

Dr. Givens, the dentist, became the leading spokesman for Austin's black community in the 1930s and 1940s. Called the "Bronze Mayor of Austin," he developed a close working relationship with Tom Miller, who served as Austin's mayor from 1933-1949 and 1955-1961.³² Givens was a graduate of Tillotson College, one of Austin's two black colleges at the time, and of Howard University's College of Dentistry. He was a physically imposing man and a good orator who periodically addressed the Austin city council, taking up large amounts of time with petitions for better street lighting, access to health care, and school revenues for East Austin. He later supported Lavada Durst when members of the African American community complained about Durst's jive talk or music selection on KVET. Whenever there was a problem, Givens would speak with the parties, and the complaints would stop.³³

Dr. Givens conspicuously never sought integration, only separate but equal facilities for blacks. During a debate over public housing in 1949, he came out against the construction of a new project in North Austin, saying that "[racial] understanding will be seriously hurt if we try to go to [sic] fast."³⁴ Later activists like Arthur DeWitty would consider Givens an "Uncle Tom."³⁵ But throughout the 1940s he was a thorn in the side of the white establishment, demanding that both the city and state government follow "separate but equal" to the letter. The same day that KVET went on-air in 1946, Dr.

³² Floylee Hunter Hemphill Goldberger, "Miller, Robert Thomas," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fmi21>. Accessed July 31st, 2012.

³³ Ada Simond, "Dr. Hep Cat Uses Insights of Disc Jockey to Aid Ministry," *Austin American-Statesman*, Sunday, August 5th, 1984, B14.

³⁴ *Austin American*, November 5th, 1949.

³⁵ Orum, 253.

Givens was the subject of a front-page article of the *Austin Statesman*. He had filed a suit in state court to force Texas to establish a branch university for blacks because he “desired to take a refresher course in dentistry and dental surgery and...no such instruction was available to Negroes in Texas.”³⁶ Given’s lawyer, Kenneth Lampkins, decided to stay clear of the NAACP’s impending attack on the “separate but equal” interpretation of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Instead, he cited the Texas Constitution, which provided for the creation of a branch university for blacks. Texas was bending over backwards to avoid complying: beginning in 1939, the state had agreed to pay the tuition of any African American who sought an advanced degree so long as they left Texas to do it.³⁷ The Texas court found against Givens, but the NAACP brought the higher education issue to federal court later that year in *Sweatt v. Painter*.³⁸

There were influential women in East Austin’s black middle class as well. Mary Branch was the president of Tillotson College from 1930 to 1944, and she served as president of the city’s NAACP chapter in 1943. A Virginian by birth, Branch had been serving as dean of the largest school for black girls in the country, Vashon High School in St. Louis, when the American Missionary Association recruited her to rescue their foundering institution in Austin. Though she was initially reluctant to come to Texas, she eventually relented, saying “I thought of the numbers of white teachers who had gone South for years since the Civil War...they had made greater sacrifices than I would be

³⁶ “Law Suit Asking Negro University For Austin Filed,” *Austin American-Statesman*, Tuesday, October 1st, 1946, A1.

³⁷ Goldstone, 16.

³⁸ Gary M. Lavergne, *Before Brown: Heman Marion Sweatt, Thurgood Marshall and the Long Road To Justice* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 87-88

called upon to make.”³⁹ In many ways Branch was Texas’ answer to Mary Macleod Bethune; she was the state’s first black female college president, and in 1935 she served on the Texas division of the National Youth Administration’s Negro Advisory Board. In this capacity, Branch worked to ensure that the New Deal’s jobs programs benefitted black Texans as well as white.

During her time at Tillotson she grew the student body from 140 to 502 students, established a rapport with faculty at the University of Texas and at fellow black institution Sam Huston College, and closed the college’s accounts with segregated businesses in Austin. In the early 1930s she addressed the Austin city council on the urgent need for a public library for the black community; the G. W. Carver branch was built in 1933. Perhaps her most lasting contribution was working with Sam Huston College President Karl E. Downs to set in motion a merger between the two schools. Though she did not live to see it come to fruition, the success of Huston-Tillotson College (now University) is enduring proof of Branch’s legacy in East Austin.⁴⁰

By 1940, African Americans made up 16.9% of Austin’s population, or roughly half of their post-Civil War share. This proportion fell again to 13.3% by 1950, but this time the drop was likely a function of Austin’s overall population growth: the city exploded, going from 87,930 residents in 1940 to 132,459 in 1950.⁴¹ The end of World War II meant soldiers returning home from abroad and starting families. Thousands more had been training at military bases in the Austin area, and many of them opted to remain

³⁹ Olive D. Brown and Michael R. Heintze, “Mary Branch: Private College Educator,” in *Black Leaders: Texans for their Times*, ed. Barr, Alwyn and Calvett, Robert A. (Texas State Historical Association, 1981), 117.

⁴⁰ *ibid*, 123.

⁴¹ U.S. Census.

in the area after the war's end. Perhaps most importantly, the G.I. bill allowed veterans to attend an accredited college or university, and Austin was home to the state's largest public university and several smaller colleges.

The University of Texas brought together a critical mass of liberal thinkers from around the country, while the statehouse brought together politicians from around Texas, many of whom represented conservative districts. This created a tension in the city that was perhaps most clearly displayed during the formal desegregation of the University in the mid-1950s. In the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's desegregation decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) the University of Texas sought to avoid a reputation for race-baiting and lawlessness like that of Ole Miss and the University of Alabama. The state board of regents felt that it would be better for Texas to be, in the words of historian E. C. Barksdale, "taken in hand and led into reality rather than... hooked and gaffed by federal bayonets until it comes flopping, floundering in like a helpless trout."⁴² There would be no footage of state officials barring schoolhouse doors; instead, the University of Texas embarked on a plan of academic integration and social segregation. Black students were admitted to the university but barred from white dormitories, varsity athletics, and social events; the university cancelled dances rather than integrate them. In this way, the Texas board of regents' approach mirrored the one taken by the Austin city council in 1928: rather than break federal law to maintain segregation, they created an environment so hostile that African Americans stayed away or segregated themselves.

⁴² Goldstone, 12. Goldstone argues that UT's "peaceful" approach to integration kept the university more segregated than other southern public universities in the long run.

The Barbara Smith controversy of 1957 was a direct result of UT's "social segregation" policy. That year, a UT Fine Arts committee chose Barbara Smith, a black soprano, to sing the female lead in the University's production of Purcell's *Dido & Aeneas*. Smith had transferred to UT in 1956 from Prairie View A&M to study with renowned professor Edra Gustafson. Since she would be performing opposite a white male student, the opera would depict an interracial love story. Representative Jerry Sadler of Percilla heard about the casting decision and quickly threatened to vote against appropriations to the University. He was joined in his disapproval by another East Texan, Representative Joe Chapman of Sulfur Springs. University President Logan Wilson ordered the College of Fine Arts to remove Smith from the role, and the dean reluctantly complied. The decision touched off campus protests that made national news.⁴³ The episode highlights the ideological differences between the statehouse and the campus; it also displays the preoccupation of many white Texans with miscegenation, or even the innuendo of miscegenation, in the 1950s. Barbara Smith's removal took place at the same time that Dr. Hepcat was spinning records that caused black and white bodies alike to dance – sometimes with each other – in the nightclubs of East Austin.

By the 1940s the NAACP had a stronger presence in Texas than in states like Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana, where hostile state and local governments made black organization more dangerous. Because of this, Texas served as the staging ground for two NAACP legal campaigns that went to the U.S. Supreme Court and resulted in sweeping national changes. In *Smith v. Allwright* (1944), the court struck down the Texas

⁴³ *ibid*, 60.

white Democratic Primary, and in *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950) they struck a preliminary blow to the separate but equal doctrine that would fall in *Brown v. Board* (1953).

Ironically, the city of Austin, where these cases were filed, had a far less vociferous NAACP chapter than Houston and Dallas, where larger African American populations could support a robust black professional class. Most black Austinites depended on whites for their employment, thus restricting their ability to speak out freely against discriminatory laws.⁴⁴ One of the earliest mentions of Austin's chapter is in 1919, when NAACP National Secretary John R. Shillady, a white man, arrived to inquire into why the state had subpoenaed the chapter's records. Shillady was brutally beaten outside Austin's Driskill Hotel by a group that included Travis County Judge David Pickle, who claimed to have warned Shillady against "inciting negroes against the whites."⁴⁵ Austin's daily newspaper, the *Austin American*, declared that Shillady had been "holding meetings with negroes and spreading propaganda," which Pickle's mob had "calculated would foment trouble."⁴⁶ Strangely enough, fifty years later, another Pickle from Austin would be instrumental in getting the state's first African American deejay on the radio.⁴⁷

John Connally, founder of KVET and former boss of Lavada Durst, was elected governor of Texas in 1962. He defeated incumbent Price Daniel in part by polling well among black Texans, whose votes were crucial now that the U.S. Supreme Court had struck down the white primary. Upon winning, Connally appointed several African Americans to minor government posts, but he also nominated die-hard segregationist

⁴⁴ Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Victory: The Rise and Fall of the White Primary in Texas* (Milwood, NY: KTO Press, 1979), 56.

⁴⁵ "Texas Judge Whips John R. Shillady," *The New York Times*, August 23rd, 1919.

⁴⁶ Herbert J. Seligmann, "The Press Abets The Mob," *The Nation*, Vol. 109 (No. 2831), 460.

⁴⁷ I was not able to determine if there was a relation between the two men.

Frank C. Erwin to the University's Board of Regents. He also firmly opposed President Kennedy's proposed Civil Rights bill.

In July of 1963 a black UT student named Booker T. Bonner led a twenty-seven hour sit-in in front of Connally's office, demanding a meeting. The governor finally agreed but backed out when other members of Bonner's group, the University of Texas Negroes for Equal Rights, showed up. Bonner then organized a demonstration at the governor's mansion where between fifty and a hundred protesters picketed and handed out pamphlets calling Connally a "Jim Crow governor of the worst kind" and "a segregationist [whose] record is one of exploitation of the thrust and hope of Negroes."⁴⁸ On August 28th, the day of Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington, Bonner led a solidarity march from Rosewood Park in East Austin to the State Capitol. An estimated 600 blacks walked through Austin's streets 102 degree heat, singing "We Shall Not Be Moved." Governor Connally's only statement was this: "Bonner apparently believes that progress on civil rights comes through demonstration. I do not."⁴⁹ This begs the question of whether Connally thought that progress on civil rights came through business deals like the one he made with Durst in 1948.

It is difficult to tell how Connally truly felt about the idea of extending equal rights to African Americans. His father was a sharecropper who had worked the fields with young blacks. Connally himself served in an integrated military during World War II. He sought out and hired an African American deejay for his radio station. But he also spoke out vehemently against the Civil Rights Act, even though its passage was a priority

⁴⁸ Goldstone, 71-72.

⁴⁹ Ann Fears Crawford and Jack Keever, *John B. Connally: Portrait in Power* (Austin: Jenkins Pub. Co., 1973), 224-225.

of his mentor, President Lyndon Johnson. The only conclusion is that the civil rights of African Americans were not worth enough for Connally to risk his political standing. In the 1960s, he was the leader of the conservative wing of the Texas Democrats, and his priority was to keep the party's conservatives from defecting to the Republicans.⁵⁰ Lyndon Johnson himself had followed the political winds on the civil rights issue: from his first term in Congress in 1937 until he assumed the presidency in 1963, Johnson voted against every civil rights bill before him, including anti-lynching legislation. Connally knew that lending support to the civil rights of African Americans could be detrimental to one's career in Texas politics.

Connally biographer Mickey Herskowitz asserts that Connally "had no prejudices" but was "not a crusader" for issues of racial equality. Herskowitz draws a distinction between the personal Connally, who was "willing to lose a few listeners if he knew he was right," and the political Connally, who would say and do whatever was necessary to ascend the political ladder. But Herskowitz believes that in 1948, Connally's aspirations were still to be a rich and famous lawyer, not a politician.⁵¹ KVET ad salesman Ron Chandler agrees, saying Durst's hire was "strictly financially motivated, but also the right thing to do," and that Connally was probably not thinking about his political career at the time.⁵²

White supremacy was firmly entrenched in Texas of the 1950s. Arthur DeWitty, the Austin correspondent for the Houston black-owned newspaper the *Informer*, decided to run for Austin city council in 1951. His weekly column functioned as Austin's de facto

⁵⁰ Interview with George Christian, April 29th, 2011, Austin, Texas. Connally himself switched parties in 1973.

⁵¹ Phone interview with Mickey Herskowitz, April 30th, 2011, Austin, Texas.

⁵² Interview with Ron Chandler.

black press, since the city had no black-owned newspaper at the time.⁵³ DeWitty rallied Austin's eastside vote and finished sixth, just a few ballots shy of winning a seat on the council. The white councilmembers were horrified, and the following year they called a special election to add a provision that necessitated runoffs if no candidate won a majority. This essentially guaranteed that promising African American candidates would be isolated head-to-head against white candidates in runoffs. The day before the special election, the *Austin Statesman* ran a special front-page editorial urging its readers to pass the changes for the explicit reason of preventing blacks and Hispanics from winning seats on the City Council. The changes passed, DeWitty did not run again, and no African American would make another bid for the Austin City Council until 1967.⁵⁴ Mainstream politics were effectively closed to nonwhites for the duration of Durst's broadcasting career.

Economic opportunity for African Americans also opened them up to white retribution. Eastside musician Major Lee Burkes recounts an incident that took place around 1950 near his childhood home in Smithville, about 40 miles east of Austin. His father, a man of Black and Mexican-American descent, bought a truck to transport cedar posts from his property to market. The truck put him in competition with a white county commissioner. The official, justifying his actions with "a nigger ain't supposed to have a truck; he's supposed to be workin'," organized a posse to steal the elder Burkes' truck at gunpoint on the road between Smithville and Houston. While the man was not physically harmed, he left Smithville (and young Major's life) soon after. "It was so simple," Major

⁵³ Orum, 198.

⁵⁴ David Van Os, "Single Member Districts," *Nokoa*, May 19th, 2011, page 2.

says. “Dad’s truck had symbolized opportunity others denied my father and his family. As a kind of reminder, the truck showed up in our yard after dad had left.”⁵⁵ With stories like this not uncommon in post-World War II central Texas, it seems possible that Durst could have been terrorized off the air, or worse, without the support of powerful benefactors like Connally.

Albert Lavada Durst was born on January 9, 1913 in Austin’s oldest African American settlement, the eastside neighborhood of Masontown. The area was named for brothers Sam and Railford Mason, who bought property in there in 1867. Though no longer identifiable as a distinct neighborhood, during Durst’s lifetime Masontown was bounded by East 6th and East 3rd Streets to the north and south and by Chicon and Waller Streets to the east and west. It was a destination for black families that migrated to central Texas from Tennessee, Mississippi, and Georgia after the Civil War, and it remained one of Austin’s most populous black enclaves well into the twentieth century.

Masontown’s history illustrates that Texas was seen as a land of opportunity not only by white Americans.⁵⁶ While the majority of blacks leaving the South after the Civil War migrated north, others headed west to partake of available land in states like Texas – places that, though former slave states, did not have the painful associations of the migrants’ own enslavement. An emancipated worker from Mississippi could arrive in central Texas, buy land, and begin a new life. Thus, the history of Durst’s childhood home demonstrates an early linkage between Texas and the black experience in the Southeast. It was a connection that Durst would both tap into and reinvent by introducing

⁵⁵ Major Lee Burkes, *In the Shadow of Austin* (Austin: L. Star Pub., 2000), 39.

⁵⁶ Vivian Elizabeth Smyrl, "Masontown, TX," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hrm80>. Accessed May 16th, 2012.

the music, fashion, and vernacular of east-coast postwar black culture to Austin in the 1950s.

Durst's mother Katie worked as a nursemaid, and his father Maud was a mason who had helped lay the foundation for the Texas State Capitol in the early 1880s. Maud also built the house at 1608 E. 4th street where young Lavada grew up with his five siblings. The Durst family helped found the Mount Olive Baptist Church across the street from the family home. More than the surrounding neighborhoods, Masontown was split between African American and Mexican-American families, and Lavada and several of his siblings learned Spanish from the neighbors. Lavada's son Charles, who grew up in the same house, remembers trading biscuits for tortillas with the neighborhood children.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Interview with Charles Durst, November 2nd, 2011, Tarzana, California.



The Goddess of Liberty statue on the Texas State Capitol Grounds before its installation on top of the rotunda, 1888. Note the presence of several African American men. Image courtesy of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

For most of Lavada's lifetime East Austin was barely considered part of the city. Masontown's sandy dirt roads would remain unpaved until the nineteen seventies; Walnut street was so named because it had an enormous walnut tree growing up in the middle of it.⁵⁸ Maud and Katie raised cows, chickens, pigs, goats, and guinea fowl on their property on E. 4th street. Katie brewed batches of sun tea from the wild tea leaves that grew in the empty lots between tin-roofed shotgun houses. Favorite pastimes for eastside children included hunting rabbits and turkey off Ben White Boulevard and walking the entire length of the Texas State Cemetery wall, which stretched four blocks

⁵⁸ Interview with Reginald Durst, October 27th, 2011, Austin, Texas; interview with Charles Durst, November 3rd, 2011, Tarzana, California.

between East 7th and East 11th streets.⁵⁹ Though it was within the boundaries of black East Austin, the cemetery was a former Confederate burial ground; no African American would be interred there until Senator Barbara Jordan became the first in 1996. Its presence within Austin's designated black district was a particularly chilling manifestation of the city's Jim Crow policies; it also meant that many white Austinites only came east to visit their dead.

Durst remembers that during Prohibition, in eastside neighborhoods with names like Cockleburr, Spanish Town, Guy Town, Froggy Bottom, Stick Town and Hungry Hill, "people who had pianos would throw open their house for a party. You paid a nickel or a dime at the door, and there'd be fried fish and chitterlings, or chitlins as some say, as well as home-brew. Musicians would travel through following the cotton crops, and they would play at these party-dances. Mostly piano players. barrelhouse-style. You couldn't keep your feet still once you heard it."⁶⁰ When he was twelve, Durst began sneaking across the street to the Mount Olive Baptist Church to play their piano when the church was empty. He would pick out blues songs by ear, or "by air," as he joked.⁶¹ Before long, he was performing at the house-rent parties.

Durst attended the only public schools available to black children in Austin, the Gregory Town School (later renamed Blackshear Elementary) and E. H. Anderson High School. He graduated from Anderson in 1932 and soon married his sweetheart, Bernice White. The couple would have two sons, Albert Junior and Charles Andrew. Durst

⁵⁹ Interview with Charles Durst, November 2nd, 2011.

⁶⁰ Billy Porterfield, "Dr. Hep Cat's Redemption: Blues Piano Master Raised from the Dead," *Austin American-Statesman*, n.d.

⁶¹ Mike Rowe, "The Jives of Dr.Hepcat," *Blues Unlimited*, Vol. 129, March/April 1978, 4-7.

worked for a period at the Sani-Products factory on West 5th street, frying potato chips.⁶² But by the early 1940s, he had found his way into a job that suited him better: athletic director for boys at the city's Rosewood Park Recreation Center. For the next thirty-five years, Durst organized athletic and social events for black youth at Rosewood and coached boys' baseball, football, and tennis, among other sports. This might sound like a minor addendum to his pioneering work in radio, and that is essentially how it has been treated by the historians who have written about Durst. However, Durst probably reached as many Austinites through his work at Rosewood as he did on the KVET airwaves, and in more meaningful and lasting ways. If Anderson High School was an essential space for the black community during the day, Rosewood Park was the hub of young African American life in Austin after school and in the summer months.

The park was a buzz of activity, a place to get together and find out what was going on that night; frequently the events were happening right there at Rosewood. Barbecues, teen dances, talent shows, and beauty pageants were all regular affairs. Every Friday in the summer, the Anderson Band competed under the legendary baton of director B. L. Joyce against other central Texas black high schools. On Juneteenth, Durst organized massive baseball and basketball tournaments that brought African American teams in chartered buses from all over Central Texas. If there was nothing scheduled that night, there was always the swimming pool, built in 1944 to offer those prohibited from whites-only Barton Springs an escape from the oppressive summer heat. The concession stand by the pool, where Durst's sisters Katie and Callie worked, served up chili dogs, popcorn, and ice cream. Impromptu dance parties would start to music (frequently from

⁶² Simond.

The Rosewood Ramble) that emanated from speakers in the trees above the stand. After sunset, the park would be so packed with people that one could see its lights and hear the voices for blocks around.⁶³

It was also around this time that Durst began to be known for his gift of gab. He became the unofficial emcee of Rosewood Park, live-announcing most of East Austin's community events, including the annual Miss East Austin pageant.⁶⁴ He had a slight lisp when he spoke, but he found that it disappeared when he jived.⁶⁵ Additionally, in what appears to presage his radio career, Durst got a job riding in a mobile advertising rig called a "sound truck." The vehicle was owned and driven by Moton Crockett, a white sound engineer, musician and businessman. Crockett would drive slowly along East 6th street while Durst rode in back, improvising commercials for local black-owned businesses through the truck's mounted public address system.⁶⁶

Emceeing and sound-truck advertising were essentially forms of do-it-yourself broadcasting that sought out black listeners at a time when radio did not. They broke down the divide between broadcaster and audience, demanding more of the practitioner: instead of relying on radio's unilateral speaking power and technological mystery, an emcee or a mobile advertiser is visible and immediately accountable to the audience's reaction. These jobs also rooted Durst geographically; his career grew directly out of his daily physical presence in Rosewood Park and on East 6th St., two essential community spaces of black Austin. These jobs were not just stepping-stones to radio for Durst; they

⁶³ Interview with William Akins, November 18th, 2010, Austin, Texas; interview with Reginald Durst; interview with Charles Durst, November 3rd 2011; interview with Ruthie Earls-Durst, Bernie Durst, Donnie Durst, Evada Durst-Jackson, and Cheryl Jackson, November 11th, 2011, Austin, Texas.

⁶⁴ Interview with Ruthie Earls-Durst, November 11th, 2011, Austin, Texas.

⁶⁵ Interview with Dr. Beulah Agnes Curry Jones.

⁶⁶ Interview with Moton Crockett, November 15th, 2010, Austin, Texas.

would actually inform the way he would practice radio. Durst would continue to do mobile broadcasts while working at KVET, live-broadcasting from business openings and Friday night teen dances at Rosewood Park. While mobile broadcasting is now commonplace, in Austin of the early 1950s it was a novel technique.⁶⁷ It helped break down the mystical divide between radio and real life, making the deejay less a wizard behind a curtain and more an entertainer in whose show the audience was expected to actively participate.

It was Durst's third announcing gig, however, that led him most directly to radio. In the mid-1940s he became the play-by-play announcer for the Austin Black Senators, the city's Negro League baseball team. Fans would flock to Disch Field as much for Durst's colorful descriptions of the plays and the players as for the games themselves. In Senators games against the Houston Black Buffaloes, the Indianapolis Clowns or the San Angelo Shepherders, Durst might jive, "Up to the bat comes Cool Papa Cheney, batting from the South side. He's a cool cat from way back...the pitcher, Sweet Slumber walker, winds up, here comes the ball, fast like a lightning bolt, phew, striiiiiiiiike called!"⁶⁸ A routine fly ball traveled so high that it asked the moon "Are you really made of green cheese?" before settling "into the darkness of the outfield's glove."⁶⁹ Phrases like these suggest the influence of jive-talking black broadcasters like Durst not only on future generations of radio deejays but on white sportscasters like Mel Allen and Harry Caray. Historian Susan Douglas uses the term "dimensional listening" to describe the way radio listeners interact with a sports broadcast, imagining the geometry of the stadium, the

⁶⁷ Jake Pickle and Peggy Pickle, *Jake* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 64.

⁶⁸ Isay, "Dr. Hepcat."

⁶⁹ Michael Hurd, "Mourners Recall the Spiritual Side of Austin's 'Dr. Hepcat,'" *Austin American-Statesman*, November 4th, 1995, B4.

positions of the athletes, the trajectory of the ball.⁷⁰ Durst brought these rich dimensional capabilities to *The Rosewood Ramble*, conjuring up images and scenes that transported the listener to the streets and clubs where music was being made.⁷¹

John Connally, co-owner of a struggling Austin radio station and an avid sports fan, went to a game at Disch field and was impressed by the crowd's enthusiasm for the announcer's unusual style. He realized that KVET needed someone like Durst if they wanted to reach black listeners; whether he suspected that Durst's jive would become popular with white listeners as well is difficult to know.

The cultural-economic niche that Durst occupied in Austin could not have existed without the changes that World War II brought to central Texas. The state was the nation's center for training army and naval airmen during the war; it played host to 175 major military installations and numerous minor ones, including 65 Army airfields, 35 Army forts and camps, and seven naval stations and bases. In total, more than 1,200,000 troops trained in Texas between 1940 and 1945.⁷² In particular, Bergstrom Air Force Base, Fort Hood, Camp Swift and Camp Mabry brought an influx of servicemen and servicewomen from across the country to the Austin area. Hundreds of black and white soldiers came to the city each weekend for entertainment and relaxation.⁷³ At the war's end, many veterans settled in the Austin area, vastly increasing the city's population of

⁷⁰ Douglas, 201.

⁷¹ According to J. J. Pickle, KVET also employed Hepcat as their radio announcer for Austin's white minor league games, but I have not been able to corroborate this with any other source. Pickle, 65.

⁷² Ralph A. Wooster, "Texans in World War II," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qdw02>. Accessed April 22nd, 2012; Texas Historical Commission, "Texas in WWII" Travel Guide (2005), www.thc.state.tx.us/publications/brochures/tx_wwII.pdf. Accessed April 22nd, 2012.

⁷³ Margaret Moser, "Bright Lights, Inner City: When Austin's Eastside Music Scene Was Lit Up Like Broadway," *Austin Chronicle*, July 4th, 2003.

young culture-seekers. Two notable black servicemen who stayed in Austin after completing their military service were baseball player Jackie Robinson and singer Bobby “Blue” Bland.

America’s black population was at almost full employment during and in the decade following the war. The average African American family income grew faster between 1940 and 1954 than it had during any previous period of U.S. history.⁷⁴ There were new demands for products and services on Austin’s East side, and new black-owned businesses opened to meet them. The entertainment sector in particular began to expand as entrepreneurs took note of the wartime rise, albeit limited, in black disposable income. They opened businesses whose names sometimes directly reflected the community’s connection to the war. Booking agent Johnny Holmes opened the Victory Grill on VJ day in 1945 after he realized that black soldiers, barred from whites-only clubs, needed a place to celebrate the war’s end. By the early 1950s, the Victory was Austin’s most popular stop for small and mid-sized black touring artists. The club’s house band was assembled by the war as well, led by guitarists Tyler Dee “T.D.” Bell, lured from a job at a defense plant in Rockdale, TX, and Henry “Blues Boy” Hubbard, who came to Austin to be a jet mechanic at Bergstrom Air Force Base.⁷⁵ They backed artists who toured without bands, including Bobby “Blue” Bland, who launched his blues career on the Victory’s stage while stationed at nearby Fort Hood. Bland won the club's amateur night so many times that he was banned from competition.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Rothenbuhler and McCourt, 372.

⁷⁵ Jay Hardwig, “Little T Bone,” *Austin Chronicle*, January 15th, 1999.

⁷⁶ Alan Govenar, *Texas Blues: The Rise of a Contemporary Sound* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2008), 488.

The influx of black military personnel in Austin led the city to construct an auditorium for the recreation needs of the Armed Forces and USO programs in 1942.⁷⁷ Located in the southwest corner of Rosewood Park, the multi-purpose gymnasium was named for Doris Miller, a naval cook from Waco whose valor at Pearl Harbor made him the first African American to win the Navy Cross. Despite its terrible acoustics, Doris Miller Auditorium quickly became an essential gathering place for Austin's black community.⁷⁸ It hosted most of the East side's large concerts and cultural events. Durst rented it from the city to put on concerts by now-iconic names like Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Charles, and James Brown early in their careers. This unassuming building, far off the radar of Austin's contemporary scene, has arguably hosted more legends of American music than any other structure in the city.⁷⁹

Not long after the city erected the Doris Miller Auditorium on Austin's East side, ten white World War II veterans converted an abandoned warehouse at 113 West 8th Street into a radio broadcast studio, installed a sound-absorbent carpet, movable mahogany walls to accommodate a full-size orchestra or country-western band, and a black Steinway grand piano. Studio B, where Lavada Durst would later broadcast, was a simpler affair, with an announcer's booth and a couple of chairs. The call letters of this radio station—KVET—were meant to showcase the founders' recent return from overseas. John Connally, J.J. Pickle, Ed Syers, Jessie Kellam, Sherman Birdwell, Willard Deason and Ed Clark had all been in the Navy; Bob Phinney and Walter Jenkins in the

⁷⁷ "Alamo and Rosewood Recreation Centers, Winter 2011-2012 Programs and Activities Brochure," Austin Parks and Recreation, 2.

⁷⁸ Interview with Marvin Douglas, November 14th, 2010, Austin, Texas.

⁷⁹ Carolyn Day-Anderson, "Hepcat Legend Largely Ignored By Black Austin, Says Rison." *Nokoa*, December 23rd, 1988.

Army; and Merrill Connally in the Marines. John Connally would be the station's general manager, since he invested \$40,000 to the others' \$5000 each.⁸⁰

However, the decade after World War II was a difficult time for American radio broadcasters. With the rise of television ownership among whites, industry giants CBS, NBC and ABC shifted the majority of their resources and syndicated programs away from radio. This left only a smattering of spot news and feature shows to fill what had been day-long radio schedules. At the same time, the FCC vastly increased the availability of radio licenses, causing the number of stations to double between 1947 and 1950 and creating more competition for listeners and advertisers. J.J. Pickle recalls how tough KVET's early years were. Like several of the other KVET founders, he was a young father who had gone into debt to invest in the station, and he was being thrown into competition with rival stations' ad salesmen who had already snapped up most of the city's potential clients. According to Pickle, three Austin stations—KVET, KNOW, and Lyndon B. Johnson's KTBC—were “scrambling for slices of a very small pie.”⁸¹

KVET's specific difficulties stemmed from its complicated relationship with then-Representative Lyndon B. Johnson, on whose Senate campaign Connally, Pickle, and other self-styled “KVET boys” worked. According to Pickle, it was Lyndon Johnson's idea to have his protégés start KVET.⁸² The reasons were twofold: it kept Connally and Pickle in Austin, available to help Johnson with his political career, and it also kept NBC from entering the Austin market and competing with Johnson's CBS

⁸⁰ Pickle, 62.

⁸¹ *ibid*, 62.

⁸² *ibid*, 60.

programming.⁸³ In business, as in politics, Johnson preferred to keep his competitors close, or, as he would later put it, “inside the tent pissing out [rather] than outside the tent pissing in.”⁸⁴

In 1943 Johnson had helped his wife, Lady Bird Johnson, purchase what was at that time Austin’s only radio station, KTBC. To do so, he exerted his political influence to procure her an FCC license and a CBS affiliation. In the infamously bitter Texas Senate race of 1948, which some say ushered in the era of the modern political campaign, Lyndon Johnson’s dominance of radio advertising may have been the decisive factor in his victory. Listeners in every part of the state heard his voice at least three times a day.⁸⁵ The Johnson family lawyer, Leonard Marks, later assisted Connally and Pickle in acquiring their own FCC license for KVET. Even though a San Antonio station had applied for the same band frequency, KVET got the license. The catch was a gentlemen’s agreement with Johnson that KVET would never directly compete for KTBC’s advertisers.⁸⁶ This left KVET in a difficult position: because they owed their existence to one of their largest competitors, they could not challenge KTBC for sponsors.

Even without KVET’s particular complications, local station managers around the country, facing the possibility of closure or financial catastrophe, sought new ways to fill airtime and to make it pay for itself. One of the primary methods they developed was to target niche groups of listeners at different times of the broadcast day in order to build a

⁸³ Rothenbuhler and McCourt, 372.

⁸⁴ Johnson on FBI Director [J. Edgar Hoover](#), quoted in *The New York Times*, October 31st, 1971.

⁸⁵ James Reston, *The Lone Star: The Life of John Connally* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 117.

⁸⁶ Pickle, 61.

hodge-podge of small but loyal advertising markets.⁸⁷ In particular, station managers began to take account of the economic potential of the new African American consumer class. During radio's so-called "golden age" during the Great Depression, most black households did not have radio sets. But a booming wartime economy and the development of the transistor made radios more affordable, and soon African American radio ownership exploded. The October 10th, 1949 issue of *Sponsor* magazine contained an article entitled "The Forgotten, 15,000,000: Ten Billion a year Negro Market is Largely Ignored by National Advertisers," signaling the first time that a major broadcast industry trade publication had devoted significant attention to the black consumer.⁸⁸ In 1949, Austin station KTXN sent out a candid pamphlet to potential advertisers entitled "How a Listener Minority Becomes a 'Listening Majority.'" It cited Austin's black and Latino communities as comprising 35% of Austin's total population, and points out that "in Central Texas...Negro and Latin Americans always live on a 'side of town'... [and] are either restricted or restrict themselves to certain retail trade outlets." Because of this, there was a captive advertising market of which radio stations were poised to take advantage.⁸⁹

WDIA 1070-AM in Memphis, Tennessee was the first station in the United States to switch to an entirely minority-appeal format. White owners Burt Ferguson and John Pepper had originally intended a programming schedule of pop, country and western, and

⁸⁷ Rothenbuhler and McCourt, 371.

⁸⁸ Barlow, 125.

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Hansen, "Broadcasting to the East Side: The Origins of African American and Latino Radio in Austin, 1947 – 1960," exhibit from Project Interpreting the Texas Past, University of Texas at Austin, 2007. Statistics for the number of Latinos in Austin in the 1950s are scarce: the 1930 census lists 9.3% of Austin's population as "Mexican," but that category was eliminated in 1940 when Latinos were lumped back in with whites.

light classical music, but by the middle of the 1948 their station faced bankruptcy. That October Ferguson convinced Pepper to hire a local African American high school teacher and emcee, Nat D. Williams, to play music of his own selection; the success of Williams' *Tan Town Jamboree* was such that by 1949 the owners decided to make WDIA the country's first station with an all-black on-air staff. By the end of 1949, WDIA was number one in the Memphis radio market, with 28 percent of Memphis radio listeners regularly tuning in. This demonstrated that a station could actually gain, not lose, white listeners by hiring black disc jockeys to play music by black artists.⁹⁰

Ferguson and Pepper's decision was strictly business; despite their willingness to showcase African American voices, they maintained an in-house color line at WDIA and disavowed any integrationist sympathies. Nat D. Williams was comfortable with the owners' profit-based motivations, which he dubbed "dollargration."⁹¹ However, he and other WDIA deejays were determined to use their position to provide a meaningful service to the Memphis black community. In 1954, when WDIA used its booming profits to expand from a 250-watt to a 50,000-watt signal that could be heard across the mid-south, the disc jockeys began to organize yearly live music revues in which artists such as B. B. King, Sam Cooke and Elvis Presley would perform free of charge to raise funds for black charities. The intersection of WDIA's business interests with its deejays' civic mission had the effect of pumping up to \$100,000 into the Memphis black community each year throughout the 1950s.⁹²

⁹⁰ Barlow, 114-121.

⁹¹ *ibid*, 114.

⁹² Barlow, 123. In 1949, Austin station KTXN became the first in Texas to switch to an entirely minority-appeal format, with a special focus on Spanish-language programming. Like WDIA in Memphis, the decision was profit-driven, but also like WDIA, KTXN's broadcasts quickly

In Austin, KVET's Pickle and Connally also sought to broaden their listenership by courting minority deejays. In 1947 KVET's business manager Jake Pickle found an Hispanic deejay in a manner similar to the way John Connally would find Lavada Durst: he made use of Austin's rigid racial geography to seek out public spaces where nonwhite Austinites could congregate. Pickle called the office at Zaragosa Park on Austin's East side and asked an administrator to make an announcement about the KVET position. Liliardo "Lalo" Campos, a twenty-two year old parks worker and Naval veteran, responded and was hired as KVET's first Spanish-language deejay. Campos' two daily programs, *Saludos Amigos* and *Noche de Fiesta*, were short in comparison to Durst's *Rosewood Ramble* but had better time slots, with *Saludos* at 6:30 AM and *Noche* at 7:00 PM. *Noche* was a program of Mexican and Tejano popular music, and its popularity eventually convinced KVET to extend it to two hours nightly.⁹³

During his shows, Campos performed live advertisements for local businesses. He would do them in Spanish, after which one of the other KVET employees would get on the microphone and say, "That was fine and dandy, Lalo, but a lot of our listeners don't understand Spanish. Can you repeat it in English?" Campos would cheerfully oblige.⁹⁴ Like Durst, Campos was hired to use language to direct his shows at a minority audience;

assumed an important role in the daily life of the target community. In a 1952 poll of Austin's Spanish-speaking neighborhoods, 96 percent of those polled listened regularly to KTXN, and 89 percent listened to KTXN more than any other station during the day. See Owen Wilson Blum, *Some Aspects of the Latin-American Market of Austin, Texas, with Emphasis on the Radio as a Means of Reaching this Market*, Master's Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1952, 65.

⁹³ "Lalo Campos," The University of Texas Oral History Project Voces, http://www.lib.utexas.edu/voces/template-stories-indiv.html?work_urn=urn%3Autl%3Awwlatin.012&work_title=Campos%2C+Lalo. Accessed July 19th, 2012.

⁹⁴ Juan Castillo, "Campos Put Accent On Austin Airwaves," *Austin American-Statesman*, Sunday, October 17th, 2004, K4.

as with Durst, KVET was attuned to the possibility of attracting curious Anglo listeners as well.

In the months after Pickle found Campos, Connally arranged for Lavada Durst to fill the “graveyard slot” between 10:30 PM and midnight when advertising rates were at a minimum. According to their agreement, Durst would pay KVET a flat fee, reportedly around fifty dollars per show, and Durst would then be responsible for selling his own advertisements.⁹⁵ There were several reasons KVET may have preferred this arrangement: first, the station filled dead air while assuming no financial risk; second, they may have believed (probably correctly) that Durst knew the African American market better than KVET’s ad men; third, KVET would be less open to accusations of integrationism if it contracted with Durst instead of formally bringing him on staff. Durst’s restriction to late-night hours was an additional buffer against white indignation. Durst would later praise Connally for “taking an awful chance” on him, but there were clear limits on what KVET was willing to risk. According to radio historian William Barlow, “buying time” was common practice at stations around the country during this period, but KVET only had this arrangement with its minority deejays.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Interview with Ron Chandler.

⁹⁶ Interview with Ron Chandler.

EIGHT REASONS WHY *Everybody* LISTENS TO K-VET

 DAVE SMITH, Program Director "MIKE MYSTERIES" Monday through Friday, 10:00 A.M.	 "BIG BOY" JONES "K-BAR ROUNDUP" Monday through Friday, 4:00 P.M.	 BOB GWYN "WAKE UP AUSTIN" Daily, 7:00 A.M.	 JOHNNY ROARK "THE UNIVERSITY HOUR" Nightly, 11:15
 GLENN BROWN SPORTS DIRECTOR PLAY-BY-PLAY ANNOUNCER	 LALO CAMPOS "SALUDOS AMIGOS," 6:30 A.M. "NOCHE DE FIESTA," 7:00 P.M.	 DR. HEPCHAT "ROSEWOOD RAMBLE" NIGHTLY, 10:30	 STUART LONG, News Editor "CAPITOL NEWSROOM" M-F, 6:15 P.M. "TEXAS AT TEN" NIGHTLY, 10:00

KVET advertising mailer, 1949

A 1949 advertising mailer demonstrated the station's early marketing strategy.⁹⁷ The ad showcased a variety of on-air personalities, many of whom touted programs that targeted specific demographics. Johnny Roark's *The University Hour* was for college students; Dave Smith's *Mike Mysteries* was for those who listened to radio drama at 10:00 AM, presumably housewives; Lalo Campos' *Saludos Amigos* and *Noche de Fiesta* were aimed at Hispanics; and Dr. Hepcat's *Rosewood Ramble* was for African Americans.

At the same time, KVET's marketing team refrained from actually telling the listener what he or she should listen to. Like broadcasting itself, this mailer was a mass communication. KVET could have sent out versions tailored to different neighborhoods in East and West Austin that highlighted or omitted specific programs. Instead, it sent out

⁹⁷ KVET advertising mailer, 1949, Durst Family Papers.

one mailer to cover its entire spectrum of listeners, leaving the final choice up to the listener and tacitly inviting crossover listening. The title, “Eight Reasons Why *Everybody* Listens To K-VET,” could mean two things: that each subgroup of KVET listeners had a specific deejay meant for them, or that everyone listened to all of these deejays. KVET made use of this ambiguity – and the impossibility of knowing for certain who was listening to what – to court racial, ethnic, gender, class and age crossover while shielding itself from accusations of integrationism.

On the surface, KVET appeared to have reaped the benefits of “dollargration” without having to address any of the complications; Lavada “Dr. Hepcat” Durst’s show was a success. At first five, then six nights a week, Dr. Hepcat spun jazz, rhythm & blues and early rock n’ roll records on KVET, sewing them together into a unbroken hour-and-a-half set with a trademark rhythmic, rhyming banter known as jive talk. The show had an open format: KVET gave him total control over what he played. Durst says, “They didn’t tell me anything, just, here it is, get it. And I got it.”⁹⁸ He says that Connally and Pickle understood that “a disc jockey should be allowed to play the type of music that he prefers because he’s out in the community, he knows what the people like.” In other words, it was good business to allow Durst the freedom to operate. However, Durst says he “knew not to play that loud, obnoxious blues;” he understood that he had been hired to play accessible, danceable music, of which he had plenty.⁹⁹

Every evening, thousands of central Texans tuned in to *The Rosewood Ramble* for a diverse selection of music they couldn’t hear on any other area station. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Durst gave many listeners their first taste of the big band swing of Count

⁹⁸ Ellsworth interview with Durst.

⁹⁹ Wheat interview with Durst.

Basie and Lionel Hampton, the jump blues of Louis Jordan and T-Bone Walker, and the jazz vocals of Sarah Vaughn and Nat King Cole. Later in the 1950s and into the early 1960s Durst was playing rhythm and blues by Fats Domino and Little Richard, rock n' roll by Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley, and soul by Ray Charles and James Brown.¹⁰⁰ Part of Durst's longevity stemmed from his ability to change with the times. "Y'know how every season how the leaves fall off the trees, how during the winter-time the leaves get shed?" Durst asked in the late 1970s. "Because it's change. Those of us who can't conform with change we die. See you've got to be able to change."¹⁰¹

Despite the fact that it was the music that attracted most of his listeners, Dr. Hepcat's jive talk provided the character of the show. Durst never took credit for inventing jive; he claimed to have learned it from the children he coached during the day in Rosewood Park.¹⁰² His innovation was to wed it to radio broadcasting, making him, along with Chicago's Daddy-O Daylie, the first deejay ever to jive on-air. While an instrumental by Count Basie or Ray Charles played in the background, Durst would improvise descriptions of the East Eleventh Street "stroll" on a Saturday night.

Yes, the Gators are sliddin' in, draped in their mud fronts,
So sharp and fly don't nobody grunt.
Zig zag pockets on one button rolls,
Bolero jackets strictly for strolls.
All the cats are hipped to the tip and draped on down,
Here are a few of the crazy cats who came to town.
There's Daddy Rabbit with the do-rag habit,
And Ice Cube Slim in his pork pie brim.
My man Jivin' Joe with Charlie the Blowtop,

¹⁰⁰ According to KVET deejay Sammy Allred, Durst was the first disc jockey to play Elvis Presley in Austin. See Program, "Texas Folklife Resources and the Carver Museum Host a Tribute to Rev. Albert Lavada Durst at Kealing Middle School, Feb 18, 1993," Durst Family Papers.

¹⁰¹ Rowe, 4-7.

¹⁰² Wheat interview with Durst.

Check out Frantic Fred and heavy Hiphop.¹⁰³

Durst even kept the advertisements interesting, since many of his sponsors – local businesses at first, but soon regional and national ones as well – often gave him free rein with their copy. One of his biggest sponsors, California-based Thunderbird Wine, already had a jive-inspired jingle, and many Austin radio listeners remember Durst’s distinctive rendition: “*What’s the woid? Thunderboid, dat’s da woid!*”¹⁰⁴

Like the buffoonish minstrelsy of *Amos n’ Andy*, jive was a cultural signifier, an attempt to define race as something audibly performed.¹⁰⁵ Unlike *Amos n’ Andy*, it was developed by blacks and for blacks. Born in the banter of swing musicians in the 1920s and 1930s, jive “first saw its light of day within the Savoy (ballroom) where it had myriad variations and countless definitions,” according to Dan Burley, managing editor of the *New York Amsterdam News*.¹⁰⁶ In the 1930s, black radio pioneer Jack Cooper of WSBC-Chicago had pushed against minstrel-show stereotypes by developing flawless standard pronunciation and a “colorless” on-air delivery. Durst, on the other hand, was among the first deejays in the nation to create a radio persona based on the use of modern African American slang from communities from Harlem to Harlingen. In doing so, he pushed the industry standard from Cooper’s “cultural competence” to a kind of “cultural transcendence” of whiteness that still, to this day, defines “cool.”¹⁰⁷ Durst’s rendition of the “Hepcat’s Prayer” would have been particularly sacrilegious to Cooper’s generation of radio practitioners:

¹⁰³ Barlow, 92.

¹⁰⁴ Pete Szilagyi, “Doctor of the Air Waves,” *Free and Easy*, No. 9 (Jan-Feb 1975).

¹⁰⁵ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 93.

¹⁰⁶ Alan Govenar, “The Blues and Jives of Dr. Hepcat,” in *Corners of Texas*, ed. Francis Edward Abernethy (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1993), 240.

¹⁰⁷ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 93.

I stash me down to cop a nod, if I am lame I'm not to blame, the stem is hard. If I am skull orchard bound, don't clip my wings no matter how I sound. In the early bright when Gabe makes his toot you must believe I'll have everything alroot. With that fly cat I'll chill my chat and fall on my righteous pad and cop a nod like mad."¹⁰⁸

It was also unacceptable to many Austinites. KVET received angry phone calls and letters from whites that were scandalized by a black man's presence on the airwaves, let alone his success. Additionally, a significant number of African Americans complained, calling Durst's jive "an insult to their race" and arguing that it reflected poorly on Austin's black community.¹⁰⁹ After hearing these criticisms, Durst went to John Connally and offered to resign. Connally told him no, saying, according to J.J. Pickle, that "if he'd wanted a proper professor for an announcer, he'd have gone to the university and gotten one."¹¹⁰ Durst agreed to stay, and with the support of Connally and longtime black community leader Dr. Everett Givens, the angry calls from East and West Austin eventually stopped coming.

There is little evidence that Durst ever used the KVET deejay booth to confront issues of racial inequality in an explicit way. Indeed, this helps to explain why he was able to stay on the air for so many years in the midst of Jim Crow. Once, early in his career, Durst invited visiting activist-educator Mary MacLeod Bethune for an on-air interview at the KVET studios. He was rebuffed by the station owners, who said he "couldn't take her to the station...in the daytime...you had to be on the night show and it

¹⁰⁸ Lavada Durst, *The Jives of Dr. Hepcat* (self-published, 1953), 6.

¹⁰⁹ Pickle, 65.

¹¹⁰ *ibid.*

was too late for her.”¹¹¹ The interview never happened, and it appears that Durst got the message; there is no record that he tried to do anything like this again.

However, Durst challenged white supremacy in other ways. Even his radio moniker, Dr. Hepcat, carries with it a complex set of cultural associations. Historian Robin D. G. Kelley describes the speech, dress, and music in 1940s Harlem as comprising a “culture of opposition” to the white mainstream’s image of African Americans as impoverished, invisible, and insignificant.¹¹² Zoot suits, conk hairstyles, bebop and jive talk were cultural developments that allowed young, self-styled “hep cats” to define their bodies and minds as something other than machines that labored for whites. Postwar whites called black males of any age “boy,” while hep cats called each other (and everyone else) “man,” throwing the word in the face of their oppressors. By adopting the name “Hepcat” and some of their flamboyant fashions, Durst identified himself with a cosmopolitan North he had never seen, one he knew only from the records he played. In doing so, he suggested that he could use radio to bring a taste of that world to Austin, offering Southern blacks and whites a different vision (and sound) of how life could be.

Furthermore, the title “doctor,” like “uncle,” had been patronizingly bestowed upon elderly black men by their white bosses and masters since the days of slavery. It was a way of recognizing wisdom while belittling a lack of formal education. By co-opting the title for himself, Durst was simultaneously fulfilling and poking fun at a long-

¹¹¹ Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004), 23.

¹¹² Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 162.

standing marker of racial subordination. He bypassed his fellow hep cats' demand to be called "man," dubbing himself "doctor" before any white person got the chance.

Durst's radio jive may have been partially a gimmick to attract listeners, but on a deeper level it challenged the notions of black inferiority upon which Jim Crow rested. In *The Black Atlantic* historian and theorist Paul Gilroy describes what he calls the "sibling dimensions of black sensibility," the politics of fulfillment and the politics of transfiguration. Fulfillment is the desire to beat the master at his own game, to produce semiotic, verbal, and textual artifacts that demonstrate the oppressed's mastery of the oppressor's "rational" system, thereby showing the fundamental hypocrisy of that system. Jive talk could be seen as fulfillment; when Durst jives, he shows his exceptional skill with language, a proficiency that an undereducated black man is not supposed to have. Though constrained by his tenuous position on a white-dominated medium, he is so good that he becomes the most popular deejay in his listening area. He plays the white game and wins.

Transfiguration, on the other hand, says Gilroy, seeks an alternative to the oppressor's definitions of rationality, progress and modernity. Its expressions tend towards the artistic and the performative: "It strives in pursuit of the sublime, struggling to repeat the unrepeatable, to present the unpresentable."¹¹³ Durst's radio jive was a kind of transfiguration. He took familiar English words – cool, cat, frame – and used them in ways that created new meaning and disoriented the unsuspecting listener. He played with notions of time, using jive to sew together various two- or three-minute records into a single, nightly, improvised performance. He used his speaking voice as an instrument,

¹¹³ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 38.

confounding the distinctions between musician and disc jockey, performer and promoter. Along with a handful of other radio deejays of the postwar era, Durst changed the way that later, better-known broadcasters like Alan Freed and Wolfman Jack would conceive of their job and their relationship to their unseen audience. Many subsequent deejays jived, but more significant is that Durst's jive helped usher in a new postwar attitude toward broadcasting, an irreverence and an intimacy that made radio relevant to a new generation of listeners and practitioners.¹¹⁴

By the mid 1950s Durst's popularity among black and white audiences in Austin was unparalleled. A walk down the University of Texas "drag" on a weeknight inevitably found *The Rosewood Ramble* emanating from nearly every car stereo.¹¹⁵ Durst commanded more weekly KVET airtime than any other deejay or announcer, and *The Rosewood Ramble* was the longest program on the KVET evening schedule besides *Austin High Football* on Fridays and the *Chicago Theatre of the Air* on Saturdays. A unique fixture in a system that depended primarily on fifteen-minute blocs of Mutual Broadcasting System radio dramas or locally-sponsored music and news shows, the *Ramble* stood out for its length and regularity on the KVET calendar.

Durst's growing popularity made KVET both glad and uneasy. When Durst discovered that he had a white following, he began to preface his shows with, "It's music for everybody on the face of this revolving globe!" KVET's program director told him to stop encouraging whites to listen because, as Durst puts it, KVET wanted to "keep it black." Durst also recalls occasions when he was snuck out of the building's back door

¹¹⁴ Douglas, 244; Barlow, 176.

¹¹⁵ Frink; Wheat interview with Durst.

“to keep somebody from throwing a rock at me.”¹¹⁶ Whether that was the real reason he had to use that door or not, KVET’s anxiety about white reactions to Durst was clear. Durst remained grateful to KVET until the end of his life, but he also alluded to the daily disrespect he received from the station’s staff.

Despite KVET’s discomfort, Durst found ways to reach out to his white listeners. In 1953 he self-published *The Jives of Dr. Hepcat*, a fourteen-page how-to manual for aspiring jive-speakers, complete with transcriptions of jive conversations and a glossary of terms frequently used on *The Rosewood Ramble*. This was by no means a first: Harlem bandleader Cab Calloway published his *Hepster’s Dictionary* in 1938, and Dan Burley published his own *Original Handbook of Harlem Jive* in 1944. In the book’s preface, Durst positions himself as a practitioner, not an innovator of jive. “This book is an attempt to put down in literary form the strong undercurrent of the swing life of young America,” he writes. “In one particular form, the vernacular of its music world, night spots and jive sessions.” More than just a way of talking, Durst suggests that jive is a lifestyle, a chosen identity. By learning to jive, the reader can tap into a national zeitgeist, aligning himself or herself with a cultural movement taking place across the nation. Durst mentions neither race, class, or gender as prerequisites or disqualifiers; rather, *The Jives of Dr. Hepcat* contains “jive that anybody can dig.”¹¹⁷

The Jives of Dr. Hepcat was not much of a financial success for Durst. It was available at drugstores and groceries around central Texas, but he was unable to get it distributed by Austin’s two record shops. At fifty cents a copy, it was relatively expensive for his younger listeners. Nevertheless, many adopted the lingo they heard on

¹¹⁶ David Isay interview with Lavada Durst, November 1992, Durst Family Papers.

¹¹⁷ Durst, *The Jives of Dr. Hepcat*, 10.

The Ramble. The halls of Anderson High School buzzed with Hepcat slang and talk of the previous night's *Ramble*. Dr. Beulah Agnes Curry Jones said that she and her friends began using the word "cool" after learning it from Dr. Hepcat.¹¹⁸ The effects were not limited to African American communities: Patsy Stephenson described how the girls at her all-white Catholic high school, after listening to Dr. Hepcat, began to refer to each other's bodies as "fine brown frames."¹¹⁹ In a way, Durst's show encouraged these teens to perform their identities in ways dictated by their cultural preferences, not by their skin color.

Stephenson credits Lavada Durst with opening up her world. She was raised by a single mother, which was a strike against her at her Catholic high school in the 1950s. She discovered *The Rosewood Ramble* when she was thirteen or fourteen, and she associates the music she heard there with the beginning of her sexual and political awakenings. In 1952 or 1953 Stephenson convinced her mother to drive her and friend Jimmy Richards to the City Coliseum for an event that they had heard about on the *Ramble*. It was a rhythm and blues revue featuring Fats Domino, Bo Diddley and several other national acts. For the first time in her life, Stephenson says, she was surrounded by African Americans. She was nervous, but felt sheepish about being so, since she and Jimmy were treated courteously in their few interactions with fellow concertgoers. "I remember thinking, 'Gee, I guess I should have known it would be this way,'" she says. At the time of the Coliseum show, Jimmy was the only other person she knew who listened to the *Ramble*, but by 1955 the rest of her friends were dancing to Durst's broadcasts of The Coasters, The Moonglows, and Ruth Brown. She recalled the

¹¹⁸ Interview with Dr. Beulah Agnes Curry Jones; Interview with William Akins.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Patsy Stephenson, November 16th, 2010, Austin, Texas.

experience of watching Pat Boone perform Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti" on *Hit Parade* in 1956. Since she and her friends already knew the original version from Durst, they laughed at the watered-down appropriations of Boone, who she called "a complete white-bread thief."¹²⁰ *The Rosewood Ramble* made them feel like insiders, even as they were appropriating "jive identity" as their own.

For Durst's African American listeners his program carried additional meaning. The *Ramble* was the first radio show designed specifically for African Americans in Texas. Blacks had listened to the radio before, of course, but they were constantly reminded that they were eavesdropping on someone else's program: the news would be about events in neighborhoods they could not enter, and the station would run advertisements for goods and services they could not buy. Black community activist Eva Lindsey tells of winning a call-in trivia contest on an Austin station in 1959, when she was twelve years old. The disc jockey took her name and address and mailed her the prize, a gift certificate for dinner at a whites-only restaurant. Eva had never been to a restaurant before; giddy with excitement, she assumed that the certificate was a special invitation that would allow her to dine there even though she was black. "I was the kind of kid, you had show me, not tell me," she says, so her father drove her to the restaurant and waited in the car while she marched up to the maître d'hôtel and showed him the certificate. After taking the paper and stepping inside for a few minutes, the headwaiter returned to inform her that she could pick up her food at the restaurant's back entrance. Eva was crestfallen; in that moment, Jim Crow became real for her. Even the thrilling invisibility of radio listening could not provide an escape; instead, it had taught her a

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

humiliating lesson that while she might eavesdrop on the white world, the things she saw and heard there were not directed at her. She did not matter.¹²¹

Stories like Eva's help us understand the significance of *The Rosewood Ramble* to African American listeners. Even something as simple as taking song requests and dedications, which Durst did, provided an affirmation of the worth of an individual listener's voice. According to one of the KVET program directors, "from the time [Durst] went on the air, until one hour later, all of the incoming telephone lines kept flashing."¹²² The ability to "talk back" to Dr. Hepcat – and to have all of Austin hear your favorite song – must have been a formative experience for many listeners who had never before been the target of a mass-media broadcast.

The parents of Durst's young white listeners were frequently unaware that their kids tuned in to *The Rosewood Ramble*, but this appears to have been less the case among black households.¹²³ African American parents and children often both listened to Durst, though not necessarily together. Dr. Curry Jones says that Durst had the endorsement of black parents because he made appropriate use of his jive talk. "It attracted an audience and helped [children] realize that slang has its place. He would use it with taste. Which is probably why our parents didn't mind us listening to it. It was their language too. You could tell they were listening to it."¹²⁴ The teachers at Anderson High would not put up with the use of slang in class, Curry Jones explains, because it was the wrong context for

¹²¹ Interview with Eva Lindsey. Since my research focuses on *The Rosewood Ramble*, I don't know the rates at which African Americans were also listening to white-produced, white-directed media in these years; my argument is only that they were not encouraged to do so.

¹²² Letter from Dave Smith to Lavada Durst, n/d, Durst Family Papers.

¹²³ Phone interview with Bertha Means, November 5th, 2010, Austin, Texas; interview with Patsy Stephenson; interview with Ruthie Earls-Durst; interview with Eva Lindsey; interview with Dr. Beulah Agnes Curry Jones.

¹²⁴ Interview with Dr. Beulah Agnes Curry Jones.

such informality. But Durst's frequent contact with teens in extracurricular environments, such as the athletic fields of Rosewood Park, weekend dances at Doris Miller Auditorium, or nightly on *The Rosewood Ramble*, allowed him to walk a line between authority figure and peer in a way that parents and teachers could not. He was able to earn the admiration of teens and the trust of parents, acting as a bridge between generations in black East Austin.

Due to the popularity and longevity of *The Rosewood Ramble*, and to Durst's tireless efforts outside the deejay booth, Austin became increasingly known for its prominence on the Chitlin' Circuit, a loose network of performance venues around the country that catered to African American audiences. The clubs were densest in Texas and Florida; B.B. King claims to have played 200 consecutive dates in Texas alone in 1950.¹²⁵ But the circuit was more than a tour route. It was the engine of an informal economy that provided black communities across the country with goods and services denied them by white institutions. At a time when most white business would not hire blacks, the circuit created jobs. When white banks would not lend to black entrepreneurs, the circuit's juke joints provided them with lines of credit.¹²⁶ It was a network that allowed for the safe passage, board and labor of black musicians – itinerant laborers who worked each night in unfamiliar towns and navigated hostile state laws. The Chitlin' Circuit made possible the careers of hundreds of seminal American musicians, while the spillover effect of keeping black dollars in black hands sustained African American communities across the country.

¹²⁵ Interview with Preston Lauderbach, October 22nd, 2011, Austin, Texas.

¹²⁶ Jonny Meyers, "Juke Joint Blues: Blues Boy Hubbard remembers Austin's Chitlin' Circuit," *Austin Chronicle*, Friday, July 13th, 2007.

Lavada Durst's career as a musical performer never truly took off. He idolized fellow Texas barrelhouse pianist Robert Shaw, a contemporary whose musical shadow Durst never grew out of.¹²⁷ As a young man in the late 1940s Durst recorded two blues piano numbers, "Hattie Green" and "Hepcat's Boogie," for Austin's Uptown Records. Uptown was owned by KVET's program director, Fred Caldwell. Durst says the records did not receive adequate promotion or distribution. "I was hoodwinked into (recording for Uptown). Caldwell later got fired at KVET and was replaced by (Willard) Deason."¹²⁸ Then, in 1949, Durst traveled to Houston to re-record "Hattie Green" and to cut "I Cried All Night" for Peacock Records, the label of legendary African American entertainment mogul Don Robey. "When Robey came along I was ready to record again, but it didn't turn out much better. I made the record, but it never went anywhere on the charts, and I didn't get anything out of that other than the fifty or so dollars I got paid after the recording session."¹²⁹ Disillusioned by his experiences with both white-owned and black-owned record companies, Durst eventually decided to put his creative energy into promoting other artists.

He became the Austin pointman for music empresarios like Robey; his influence was critical to making any black artist's stop in Austin a success.¹³⁰ Durst later said, "I was their agent here in this locality. No one could survive if they tried to compete against me here in this area."¹³¹ He was responsible for every aspect of the show, including picking up shipments of posters at the bus station and nailing them to telephone poles on

¹²⁷ Wheat interview with Durst.

¹²⁸ Govenar, "Blues and Jives," 243.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

¹³⁰ Tim Schuller, "The Barrelhouse Men of Austin," *Texas Observer*, n.d., Durst Family Papers; Govenar, "Blues and Jives," 242.

¹³¹ Ellsworth interview with Durst.

the East side.¹³² Over the span of twenty years, Durst booked, promoted and hired local backing bands for many of the artists he played on the *Rosewood Ramble*, including bluesmen B.B. King, Bobby “Blue” Bland and T-Bone Walker; jazz musicians Ella Fitzgerald, Lionel Hampton and Nat King Cole; black rock n’ rollers Bo Diddley, Fats Domino, and Little Richard; and soul men Ray Charles, Sam Cooke and James Brown.¹³³ As Durst later put it, “You name ‘em and we’ll claim ‘em.”¹³⁴ For the most well-known artists, he rented Doris Miller Auditorium in Rosewood Park from the city; up-and-coming acts played smaller eastside clubs like Good Daddy’s, Sam’s Showcase, The Ira Littlefield (I.L.) Club, The Victory Grill, and Charlie’s Playhouse. By the late 1950s, Durst had helped turn East Eleventh Street into Austin's premier musical destination. “Lit up like Broadway,” is how one Austinite recalled the blocks of clubs that brought in hoards of white and black revelers – and dollars – every weekend.¹³⁵

Aside from posters and word-of-mouth, radio promotion was the only form of advertising on the Chitlin’ Circuit. One Austin musician explained, “Lavada Durst and (subsequent black deejay) Tony Von were how you figured out who was coming.”¹³⁶ Another claimed that he never knew where he was gigging that night until he tuned in to the radio.¹³⁷ And there was good money to be made. Durst never turned much profit selling ads on *The Rosewood Ramble* – he retained his day job as a city athletic director throughout his radio career – but his job as a promoter on the circuit provided an

¹³² Interview with Charles Durst, November 3rd, 2011.

¹³³ Interview with Dr. James Polk, November 17th, 2010, Austin, Texas.

¹³⁴ Ellsworth interview with Durst.

¹³⁵ Moser, “Bright Lights.”

¹³⁶ Interview with Dr. Polk.

¹³⁷ Burkes, 112.

important secondary source of income. His son Charles recalls sitting on his parents' bed and counting revenue from ticket sales from one show that totaled \$15,000.¹³⁸

Things didn't always go as planned. There was no insurance on the circuit, and if an artist failed to perform to expectations, Durst could lose money. During one memorable performance by Etta James, the singer was so stoned that she only got through four or five songs and members of the audience demanded a refund. Even though Durst hired Austin's only two black policemen to work security, they couldn't always maintain order.¹³⁹ Longtime sideman Major Lee Burkes learned carry a pistol in back of his amp and to keep a knife on top of the piano at all times.¹⁴⁰ Several musicians recalled at least one club so rough that chicken wire had to be strung around the stage to protect the band from projectiles from the audience. At closing time, the musicians would pack up and head outside the city limits for jam sessions at late-night spots like Ernie's Chicken Shack. This practice aggravated Durst, who felt that if he had worked hard to promote an artist's paid show, the artist shouldn't go elsewhere and play for free.¹⁴¹

Many black musicians had opportunities to play in nightclubs on the white side of town under Jim Crow. However, their presence was always conditional upon remaining in their role as contract laborers: they were there to work, not to play. Dr. James Polk, an Austin-area jazz musician who went on to become Ray Charles' band director in the 1970s, remembers performing one night in the early 1960s at the Top Hat Lounge in West Austin. The Top Hat usually booked country and western acts. During the set break,

¹³⁸ Interview with Charles Durst, November 2nd, 2011. Charles grew up to become a business analyst, stock trader and insurance agent.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Burkes, 65.

¹⁴¹ Schuller.

a white teenage girl who had seen Polk play several times before ran onstage and gave him a hug. He blanched and told her, “Now you’d better hug everybody on the bandstand.” She did, but the Top Hat’s promoter Al Sacks was unsatisfied. He ejected the girl and fired the band on the spot. Like KVET, the Top Hat wanted black sounds without black bodies; when the sounds’ source was suddenly made too visible for Jim Crow sensibilities, Sacks fired Polk.¹⁴²

The story helps set the scene for what was happening concurrently on the other side of town, where whites began entering black space en masse. Charlie’s Playhouse was the first eastside club to become a destination for white college students. This was partially due to its location, since it was one of the westernmost clubs on East Eleventh Street, but it was also due to the business sense of its owner. In 1958 Charlie Earnest Gilden purchased the entire 1200 block of East Eleventh, which housed a barbershop, a dry cleaners, a liquor store, and a jazz club called the Show Bar. Gilden renovated and expanded the club, renamed it Charlie’s Playhouse, and convinced Blues Boy Hubbard and the Jets to leave the Victory Grill and become his house band. The new Playhouse had a beautiful hardwood dance floor, and Gilden knew that Hubbard’s electric guitar would get a younger crowd moving. For the right price, Hubbard consented, and Gilden’s club quickly became the East side’s newest hotspot.¹⁴³

Like the Victory, Charlie’s Playhouse became a stopover for musicians traveling the Chitlin’ Circuit. Durst promoted these shows on KVET and would often show up at

¹⁴² Interview with Dr. James Polk.

¹⁴³ “Charlie’s Playhouse,” Austin’s East End Cultural Heritage District, DiverseArts, <http://diversearts.microassistdemo.com/culture-art-music/venues/charlies-playhouse>. Accessed July 25th, 2012; for dance floor, see interview with Ron Chandler.

the club after the *Ramble* to keep jiving for Charlie's patrons.¹⁴⁴ Ike and Tina Turner made regular appearances at the Playhouse, coming in to do late-night sets backed by Hubbard and The Jets. But unlike some of the area's rough-and-tumble blues bars and juke joints, the Playhouse maintained a reputation as a slightly more upscale venue; Charlie and his wife Ivy enforced a dress code, insisted that Hubbard and his band wear tuxedos, and demanded that the musicians and staff behave professionally at all times.

Due to the Playhouse's convenient location, its reputation as a safe place to hear blues, and Durst's on-air promotion, by 1960 white students had begun showing up on Friday and Saturday nights.¹⁴⁵ "They started calling Charlie," said Hubbard, "and he had a girl named Eleanor. She would be there early, open up early. So they would call her, and asked her, 'Could whites come to the club?' and all this kind of stuff. And she said, "Yeah, definitely."¹⁴⁶ Hubbard and the Jets also began to get bookings at UT fraternity and sorority parties; as their fame spread within university circles, more and more students began venturing across East Avenue to see them play on their home turf. As Hubbard recalls, it got "to the point where if you went to Charlie's on a Friday or Saturday, the place was completely White. It would be like ninety-eight percent White."¹⁴⁷ By the time music fan Patsy Stephenson first went to Charlie's in 1961, she said it felt like a place "where big bunches of white frat boys and sorority girls went

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Dr. James Polk.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ "Charlie's Playhouse," Austin's East End Cultural Heritage District, DiverseArts.

¹⁴⁷ Roger Gatchet, "Whose Blues?: Race Relations and Segregation on the East Austin Blues Scene," exhibit from Project Interpreting the Texas Past, University of Texas at Austin, 2008. Available at <http://diversearts.microassistdemo.com/culture-art-music/musical-styles/whose-blues-race-relations-and-segregation-east-austin-blues-scene>. Accessed May 2nd, 2012.

slumming and did the twist and got drunk and rowdy. I didn't think there was any appreciating of Black culture going on there.”¹⁴⁸

The Playhouse’s popularity with whites brought both opportunities and complications for Charlie Gilden. His dance floor was always packed, but he was vigilant about breaking up interracial dancing for fear that the club would become known as a place that encouraged miscegenation. He began to charge a higher cover on weekends and to accept reservations from large groups of whites. He also would ask smaller parties or groups that were not spending much money to move from a large table if he had a bigger group come in. Since most of the big and wealthy groups were white, this practice angered his African American regulars, who felt that Charlie was pushing them out of a space that was rightfully theirs. Hubbard explained their frustration:

“So you may walk in there...and there’s not a lot of people...and some blacks would come there, and look in there, and say, ‘Well let’s go in here.’ And [the Playhouse employees] would say, ‘Well all that’s reserved.’ ...the white university brothers had already reserved the whole spot for maybe fifty people...And black people couldn’t understand, ‘What do you mean reserved? This is a Black club. I should be able to walk in here and sit wherever I want to or when I want to.’ But that’s what they found out they couldn’t do. And they was getting pissed about that, you know.”¹⁴⁹

Black Austinites had limited options for an evening out; they couldn’t go to places like the Top Hat Lounge. Segregation barred them from most of the city, but it also created what Robin D. G. Kelley dubs “black space:” places like churches, bars, social clubs, barber shops and beauty salons where blacks could congregate outside the gaze of whites and escape the feeling of being second-class citizens for a while.¹⁵⁰

Charlie’s Playhouse had been one of those spaces, but as it became popular with whites

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Patsy Stephenson.

¹⁴⁹ Gatchet.

¹⁵⁰ Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 51.

and Gilden appeared to prioritize their business, black clubgoers felt Jim Crowed once again.

Despite the assertions of many musicians, including Blues Boy Hubbard and James Polk, that Charlie did not discriminate based on race – that he would just as soon relocate a table of whites that was not spending enough money – Gilden soon developed a reputation as an “Uncle Tom.”¹⁵¹ A group of African American students from Huston-Tillotson College organized a boycott of Charlie’s Playhouse and Gilden’s other club, Ernie’s Chicken Shack. The boycott had little economic effect due to the steady stream of white patrons. But Gilden did inaugurate “Soul Nights” on Mondays, which were meant to be for his black clientele. This only added insult to injury for some who felt that their business was being further deprioritized. As Tommy Wyatt, an African American man from the East side put it, the real issue was that Charlie’s Playhouse “was the biggest club in Austin, for East Austin...and we couldn't go there on Friday and Saturday night.”¹⁵²

Like Durst or Connally, Gilden was a businessman who did not shy away from an unexpected opportunity. He intended to tap into Austin’s African American market, but when whites became his largest clientele, he reaped the financial benefits. Durst and Gilden depended upon one another: the Playhouse’s crossover success was facilitated by Durst’s nightly KVET broadcasts, and Durst’s career as an agent and promoter on the Chitlin’ Circuit was made possible by his relationships with venue owners like Gilden. But while many of Durst’s black and white listeners consider him to have struck a blow

¹⁵¹ Gatchet; interview with Dr. James Polk.

¹⁵² “Charlie’s Playhouse,” Austin’s East End Cultural Heritage District, DiverseArts. Monday “soul nights” persist to this day at several African American-owned bars in Austin. Ironically, they are typically packed with whites.

against segregation, Gilden was seen as an opportunist, a mercenary who was willing to sell out other African Americans to get ahead.

The difference was radio's accessibility and its detachment from segregated space. No one could keep you from entering Durst's *Rosewood Ramble* if you wanted, and no one knew for sure who else was listening. In the same way that KVET could be coy about their crossover intentions, Durst could avoid censure from both blacks and whites by acting as though he were "beam[ing] it directly to black people," even as he and his advertisers knew that an increasing number of his listeners were white.¹⁵³ Gilden never had that luxury: his business was tied to the physicality of seeing and being seen, of dance, of bodies in motion. He could not take advantage of the Playhouse's popularity with whites without changing the experience of his black customers.

Lavada Durst retired from radio broadcasting in 1963. According to former KVET ad salesman Ron Chandler, the immediate cause was health problems, but the decision was precipitated by the departure of KVET's final remaining founder, Willard Deason.¹⁵⁴ Connally and Pickle had left in KVET in 1949 to pursue their respective careers; by the early 1950s the other co-founders had followed suit. They sold their stock to Deason, who took an active role in the station's day-to-day operations and shared a close working relationship with Durst. When Deason left, the station's new owner hired a general manager who did not share Deason and Durst's history.¹⁵⁵

However, Durst had other reasons for hanging up his radio spurs. Years of working with children in Rosewood Park by day and with musicians and clubgoers by

¹⁵³ Frink.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Ron Chandler.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*

night had created a certain amount of tension in his life. By 1953, *The Rosewood Ramble* attracted national sponsors that included Thunderbird Wine and Grand Prize Beer.¹⁵⁶ Lavada's son Charles says that his father did not drink and kept a closet full of the beer he was given by these companies.¹⁵⁷ But it was difficult for Dr. Hepcat to reconcile these adult-oriented sponsorships with his day job and with the younger segment of the *Ramble's* audience.

Durst's caution is visible in the juxtaposition of two photos: a promotional shot for Grand Prize Beer and the cover of his jive dictionary, *The Jives of Dr. Hepcat*. In the Grand Prize Beer image, Durst, dressed in a tan suit, leans over the KVET broadcast console. He is surrounded by the trappings of mass communication of the post-World War II era: record turntables, microphones, headphones, a clock, a telephone and sundry knobs, switches and dials that all suggest the modernity and complexity of radio. His broad smile demonstrates his confidence in his control over these machines; he knows how to project his warmth and personality over radio's apparatus. More than just confident, Durst makes a party out of broadcasting: he is gesturing towards a pyramid of Grand Prize beer cans stacked next to his turntable.

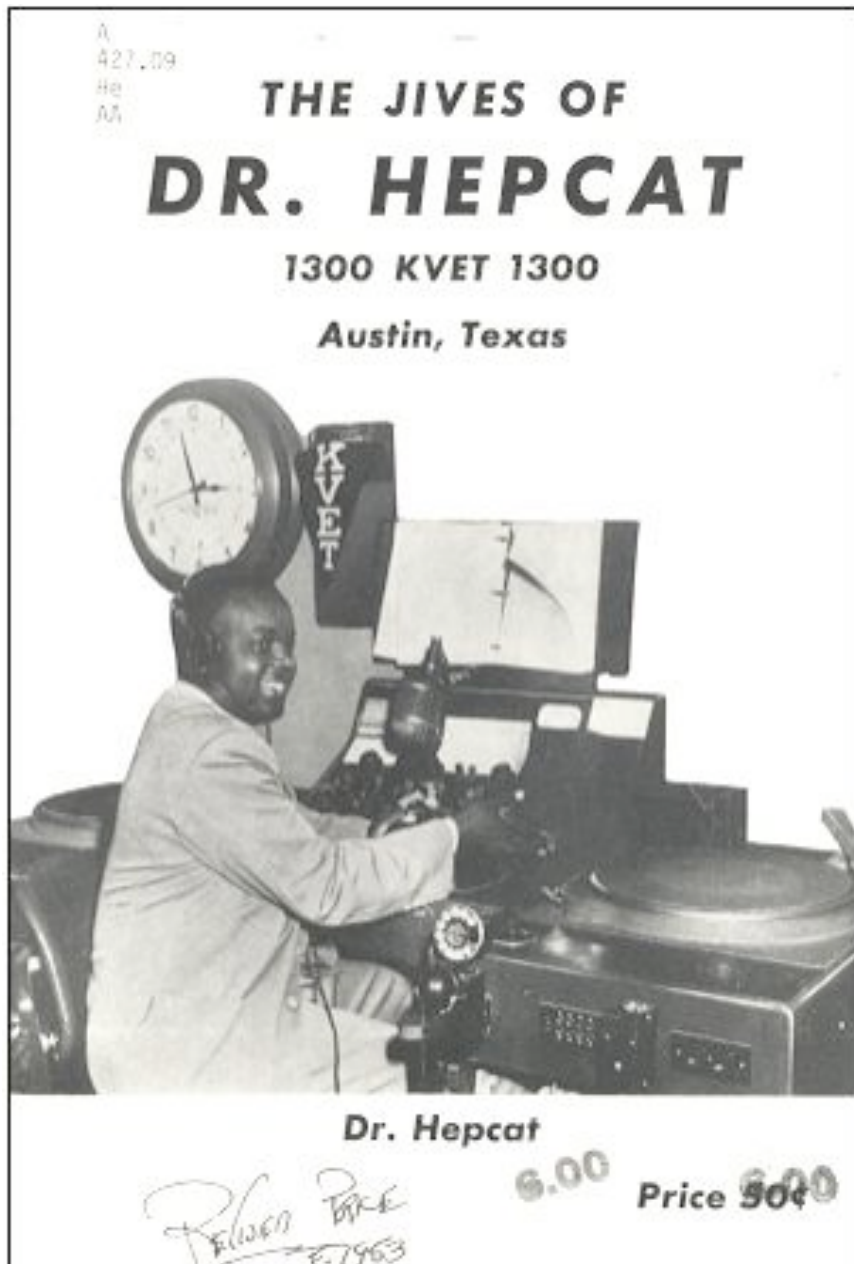
This same photo graces the cover of *The Jives of Dr. Hepcat*, except it has been skillfully altered so that the beer cans are no longer visible. Durst was obviously aware that Austin teens heard the live advertisements he did for bars, nightclubs, and beer and wine manufacturers on *The Rosewood Ramble*, but he decided that his own printed product should be sanitized of these reminders of jive's colorful origins.

¹⁵⁶ Szilagyi.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Charles Durst, November 3rd, 2011.



Photo of Lavada Durst for Grand Prize Beer, Durst Family Papers.



Book of jive talk, written by Austin disc jockey Albert Lavada Durst (Dr. Hepcat), 1953. [A 427.09 He AA] Austin History Center.

There was also tension between Durst's career in the clubs and his religious life. He and his wife Bernice were parishioners at the New Mount Olive Baptist Church on East 11th Street. Six of his fellow churchmembers were ex-servicemen who had founded a gospel sextet called The Bells of Joy. In 1951 Durst helped bring them to the attention of

Don Robey, owner of Houston's Peacock Records. Robey agreed to record The Bells, and Durst wrote the lyrics to what would become their first hit, "Let's Talk About Jesus." However, Durst omitted his name from the credits because he thought that gospel record buyers wouldn't buy a song written by a well-known rhythm and blues deejay. "Let's Talk About Jesus" became Peacock Records' best-selling gospel record of all time, moving over 500,000 copies, and songwriting royalties went entirely to the group's leader, A.C. Littlefield.¹⁵⁸ Later in life, Durst would lament that he had given up a small fortune because he had bowed before an earlier era's misperceptions about immutable divisions between sacred and secular music.¹⁵⁹

In 1965, two years after retiring from KVET, Durst was ordained as a minister at the New Mount Olive Baptist Church. He said he knew that his verbal gifts would eventually lead him to the pulpit, but he resisted because of all he thought he'd have to give up. "I'd listened to the old doctrine that R&B was bad, that you can't be religious and play that sort of thing. In the religious upbringing, the older people didn't believe in playin' ball or dancin' on Sundays. People didn't do much on Sundays but eat. And you *sure* didn't play the blues!"¹⁶⁰ However, retiring from KVET and taking a more active role in the church was not enough for Durst's wife Bernice, who hated that her husband continued to book, promote and sometimes perform music in bars. "There were more

¹⁵⁸ Galen Gart and Roy C. Ames, *Duke/Peacock Records: An Illustrated History with Discography* (Milford: Big Nickel Publications, 1990), 40; Rowe, "The Jives," 4-7.

¹⁵⁹ Govenar, "Blues and Jives," 243. Similarly, in the late 1950s Durst managed The Chariottes, a female gospel sextet from Austin. "They recorded some songs for Robey using my lyrics," he said. "One of their better known numbers was 'Step By Step,' which was eventually made into sheet music. You can still find it in churches today, but I got no money for that either."

¹⁶⁰ Tim Schuller, "The barrelhouse men of Austin," *Texas Observer*.

divisions than color between Baptists,” he explained.¹⁶¹ Durst eventually gave up playing blues piano but continued to promote secular music in Austin.

Despite his light-heartedness in interviews when discussing the tension between his careers, it’s clear that the guilt he felt was real. “The radio job built me up to preaching. But I didn’t want to do it...[and] one thing began to happen after another. My brother became very ill and I said to the Lord if you get him well, I’ll preach. He got well, doing fine, I didn’t preach and he dropped dead. On and on things like that kept happening so I started preaching.”¹⁶² Bernice was correct that it was hard for Durst to work in nightclubs and not have it effect his lifestyle. “I used to make five and six hundred dollars a night [and] I didn’t have a penny,” Durst said. “When I started preaching, I made less money, paid for my home, got cars, people give me anything I ask for, people gave me unlimited credit in certain areas. It has been a blessing in my life, the ministry.”¹⁶³ Durst developed a lazy eye late in life and wore sunglasses in public, even when speaking from the pulpit. Some churchgoers disapproved of this, believing it a sign of disrespect, or of his incomplete transition from bluesman to churchman.¹⁶⁴ “People say that [I’m] trying to make money, or [I don’t] know what [I’m] talking about,” said Durst. “I made more money as a disc jockey, when I was freelancing, when I promoted dances, when I was hustling and rustling, I made money, but the bible has declared that the wicked can’t prosper, and this is true.”¹⁶⁵

161 Porterfield.

162 Ellsworth interview with Durst.

163 *ibid.*

164 Interview with Reginald Durst.

165 Ellsworth interview with Durst.

There were similarities and differences between Durst's broadcasting and preaching styles. In both formats he felt a responsibility to entertain, to reach out to the reluctant listener. "You have to get to them, they sure ain't comin' to you."¹⁶⁶ However, he felt that his words from the pulpit carried more weight, and he adjusted accordingly: "You see, when you preach, you take your time and say something, you understand, there's not shoutin' and hollerin' and jiving. You got to really put it on the line, so consequently my speech has slowed down. I think out each word before I say it, because once you're back in radio, once you send it out, you can't reach and get it back, you know, if the audience hears something, its gone."¹⁶⁷ Despite what he considers to be preaching's higher stakes, Durst ultimately says that both of these forms of mass communication carry a similar responsibility: your words, good or ill, will be heard and judged by a large flock of followers. You are a leader, a public figure, and a role model, and you must act as such.

Due to a combination of his own religious convictions, pressure from Bernice, and a fear of flying, Durst declined offers to play the barrelhouse piano at blues festivals in Europe in the 1970s and early 1980s.¹⁶⁸ In 1972 he was named associate minister at another church, Olivet Baptist Church on San Bernard Street. The pastor there was a younger man named Reverend Lawrence Weeks, and for years Weeks did not know that his associate minister had been a blues musician. In 1982, on a bus ride to Memphis for a denominational meeting, Durst mentioned to Weeks that he had once turned down an opportunity to perform in London. "And he stunned us, particularly Bernice," Durst said,

¹⁶⁶ Szilagy.

¹⁶⁷ Ellsworth interview with Durst.

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Reginald Durst; Porterfield.

“by saying, ‘Wait, you have to examine this.’ He went on to say that every good and perfect gift comes from God, and that as long as I was using it for enjoyment and pleasure and not for ill, that there was no harm in it.” About a month later, Bernice bought her husband a piano.¹⁶⁹ She would pass away in 1983, but her blessing allowed Durst to pursue a musical career during the final decade of his life.

He started performing again, but no longer in bars and nightclubs; he was now being sought after by academics and folk revivalists. It would prove to be a successful niche for Durst. In 1986 the Dallas non-profit organization Documentary Arts included his barrelhouse piano version of “How Long” on a compilation disc entitled “Deep Ellum Blues.” The following year he participated in the “Texas Blues Reunion,” an event organized at the Victory Grill by Austin folklorist Tary Owens that brought together a number of prominent eastside musicians of the 1950s and 1960s. Later in 1987 Owens issued a compilation album called “Texas Piano Professors” on his Catfish label that featured Durst alongside Austin blues legends Erbie Bowser, T.D. Bell, and Grey Ghost.¹⁷⁰ In the summer of 1988 Durst traveled to Chicago to perform at the Chicago Blues Festival, and in 1989 he signed a recording contract with Bay Area folk music company Arhoolie Records. Over the next several years Durst’s musical engagements continued to take him farther from Austin than he had ever been, including the St. Louis Folk Festival and the San Francisco Blues Festival.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Porterfield.

¹⁷⁰ Alan Govenar, “The Piano Blues of Dr. Hepcat.” liner notes for audio cassette, Documentary Arts, 1994. Available at http://www.docarts.com/piano_blues_of_dr_hepcat.html. Accessed July 31st, 2012.

¹⁷¹ Arhoolie contract and assorted festival programs, Durst Family Papers.

On Durst's eightieth birthday in 1993, Texas Governor Ann Richards sent a letter thanking him for the ways he had "influenced tens of thousands of Central Texas kids of all colors."¹⁷² Perhaps understandably, the letter focused on his careers in broadcasting and music. But Durst's thirty-five years of organizing athletic and social events in Rosewood Park probably did more to directly improve the lives of East Austin children. Thomas "Hollywood" Henderson, a former all-pro linebacker for the Dallas Cowboys who grew up in Austin, said that "the citizenship, friendship and character of Durst rubbed off on a bunch of us...he positively affected my life."¹⁷³ Durst was legendary for his calm, composed manner, remaining soft-spoken even when breaking up fights in Rosewood Park.¹⁷⁴ He taught children to control the expressions of their anger, a vital skill for black boys and girls living in the Jim Crow South. He made house calls to teach boys how to dance, playing the part of the part of the young lady until the boy learned to lead.¹⁷⁵ During the final decade of his life, after Bernice's passing, Durst lived with his sister Callie in the house their father built on East 4th Street. They took to inviting children from the public housing development across the street to dinner every Sunday.¹⁷⁶ In all of these ways and more, he acted as a surrogate father to East Austin kids until his death on October 31st, 1995.

In 2009, the Austin city government convened a committee of local music industry professionals to select a class of inductees to the city's new Austin Music Memorial. Members could only be inducted posthumously; each would have a plaque

¹⁷² Letter to Durst from Texas Governor Ann Richards, Feb 15th, 1993, Durst Family Papers.

¹⁷³ Thomas "Hollywood" Henderson, "A Tribute to Lavada Durst," Durst Family Papers.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Reginald Durst.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Charles Durst, November 3rd, 2011.

¹⁷⁶ John Bryant, "Minister Says Video Can Save The Blues," *Austin American-Statesman*, June 21st, 1990.

with his or her name installed at the Joe R. and Tereza Lozano Long Center, the city's brand-new \$77 million performing arts space in downtown Austin. Lavada Durst was a member of the inaugural class. As of 2012, there are twenty-nine other honorees. Two of them, Elmer Akins and Lalo Campos, were also KVET minority deejays who got their start in the post-World War II era. Eight more inductees were musicians and club owners directly involved in the eastside blues scene during the 1950s and 1960s, and another five were noted black classical, jazz or gospel musicians who got their start on Austin's East side during that period and went on to national careers. It is remarkable that over half of the members of Austin music's "hall of fame" (whose scope reaches back to the mid-nineteenth century) are associated with little more than a decade in Austin's only designated minority neighborhood. The selection committee recognized that those years, and that neighborhood, had an outsize influence on the musical culture for which Austin has become famous.¹⁷⁷

The memorial at the Long Center is an important gesture, a public expression of recognition for what the postwar eastside music scene did for the city. It is also symptomatic of Austin's unequal relationship with its East side. Civic leaders chose the black and brown figures they wanted to incorporate into Austin's cultural history, moved them to a highly visible downtown location, and made them part of Austin's useable past. Meanwhile, the physical structures of the East side where these figures made Austin's history are steadily being plowed under by new development. The East side's poverty and crime, and the bleak future they creates for thousands of Austin children, remain hidden

¹⁷⁷ "Austin Music Memorial," <http://governor.state.tx.us/music/tour/austin-music-memorial>. Accessed August 5th, 2012; Margaret Moser. "Do the Right Thing: Call Me Commissioner," *Austin Chronicle*, Friday, Dec 25th, 2009.

from the tourists whose desire for an “authentic” Austin musical experience brings millions of dollars to the downtown corridor each year. Just as tuning into the *Rosewood Ramble* did, the Music Memorial and the downtown clubs offer visitors the chance to “partake of the spirit” of the city’s rich musical culture “without being forced to witness or experience its deprivations and injustices.”¹⁷⁸

However, there is a second monument to Durst in Austin. In 2011, the city renamed the Chestnut House in Rosewood Park the Britton, Durst, Howard, and Spence Center. An unassuming one-room building in the park’s northwest corner, it now houses the offices of the East Austin Youth Foundation, an organization with a mission to provide low-cost educational and athletic programs for students in the East Austin community.¹⁷⁹ Compared to the grandeur of the Long Center, the Britton, Durst, Howard and Spence Center seems plain and insignificant. But the work that volunteers do there to address Austin’s lingering civil rights problems – the race, class, and gender inequalities that persist in the shadow of America’s fastest-growing city – is a far better memorial to Durst’s life and contributions.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Douglas, 18.

¹⁷⁹ East Austin Youth Foundation, <http://www.eteamz.com/EastAustinYouthFoundation/>. Accessed July 31st, 2012.

¹⁸⁰ Daniel Fisher, “America’s Fastest-Growing Cities,” *Forbes*, April 18th, 2012.

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