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# The New Noisemakers

An urban flash-in-the pan or an arty reawakening? Deep Ellum is slowly getting new leases on life

| By Mark Stuertz | Photography by Ben Garrett |



**BRINGING BACK THE NIGHT** Vanilla Ice drummer Clint Barlow plans to revive *Trees* in mid-August after giving the disheveled club a facelift. "It's still going to be a rock club, but it's going to be a hell of a lot nicer than it used to be," he says.

Two decades ago, a forgotten vestige of Dallas' past called Deep Ellum began the creative unleashing of its stagnant urban soul: fine food wreathed in urban grit; a fertile live music scene born of bootstrapped scrap; stocks of visual arts heterodoxy. Now Deep Ellum—home to lofts retrofitted from one of Henry Ford's earliest Model T assembly plants—is barely more than a skeletal phantasm of its former self; a neighborhood felled by its own excesses (high rents, commercialized edginess), a pinch of recklessness (crime and rumors of crime), and bad plumbing (raw sewage backing up into a heady froth).

"People don't get how hard it is to create energy in this urban environment," says broker Barry Annino, president of the nonprofit Deep Ellum Foundation. "There's a lot of obstacles down here: sewers, curbs, sidewalks, copper thieves, parking meters, [parking] booters."

Vigor returned for a moment last summer when Beck Ventures, a Dallas investment firm, contracted to purchase some 14 acres of Deep Ellum for redevelopment. But the deal unraveled in the wake of last year's credit implosion and real estate devaluation. Add to that the deaths of Deep Ellum real estate pioneers Lou Reese (last July) and Don Blanton (last December)—and you have rebirth gone stillborn.

Yet energy is returning. Not in one sweeping transformative jolt, but in scattered incremental sparks. Deep Ellum's visual arts scene is reinvigorating with a healthy portfolio of some 25 art galleries, including the newly emerging spaces Gallery 2910, Dahlia Woods Gallery and Road Agent. *The Traveling Man*, a \$1.365 million sculpture by Reel FX Creative Studios and Brad Oldham Inc. should be installed around the Deep Ellum DART Station by late August.

Even cuisine—relatively moribund since the deaths of the Green Room and Deep Ellum Café and the flight of Sambuca and East Wind—is staging a rally in bits and morsels. Joining dining survivors Monica's Aca y Alla and Local are Cowboy Chow, Twisted Root Burger Co. and Lemongrass, a Vietnamese restaurant in the former East Wind space with onetime East Wind owner Tuyet Davis as chef.

And what exhausted urban enclave couldn't use a winery? Calais Winery—founded by Benjamin Calais, a former software engineer for CheckPhone Technologies—opened last summer on Commerce Street. The 500-case boutique winery bottles mostly reds: blended Cabernet Franc, Cabernet and Syrah grapes with Texas and California pedigree.

"The neighborhood bottomed out," says Kettle Art Gallery owner Frank Campagna, founder of the first Deep Ellum live music club in 1982 dubbed Studio D—essentially a warehouse with a drum riser and card table. "It bottomed out, the art scene moved in and got things shaking again."

While Deep Ellum once flaunted its urbanity with galleries, tattoo parlors, lofts and diverse retail shops, it earned its cred with live music. From its warehouse bowels emerged a plethora of *made* CONTINUED..





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...CONTINUED *it* local bands including Buck Pets, Decadent Dub Team, Rigor Mortis, Funland, Tripping Daisy and Edie Brickell & New Bohemians. Its clubs hosted national acts such as Nirvana, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Jane’s Addiction and Sound Garden.

“Back then there was a feeling that every night was special,” says Jeffrey Liles, former booking agent for ground-breaking clubs Theatre Gallery and Trees. “It had this feeling that everything we were doing was incredibly profound, even if it wasn’t. It just felt important,” says Liles, now artistic director for Oak Cliff’s Kessler Theatre. Opened in 1984 by construction worker Russell Hobbs, Theatre Gallery was a vacant warehouse whittled into art gallery, live concert venue and living space with construction site debris sans the appropriate permits and licenses. “It was lawlessness,” says Liles. “We weren’t adherent to the same rules.”

Photographer Sean Fitzgerald, president of the Deep Ellum Community Association, calls Deep Ellum a wetland of creativity. In the 1920s and 1930s, Deep Ellum was a hotbed of jazz and blues featuring Blind Lemon Jefferson, Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter, Robert Johnson and Bessie Smith.

El Paso native Clint Barlow hopes to bring some of that gritty magic back by reviving Trees, the club that hosted the likes of Nirvana and Marilyn Manson. Drummer for rock rapper Vanilla Ice, Barlow plans to open Trees by mid-August after giving the disheveled club a facelift. “It’s still going to be a rock club, but it’s going to be a hell of a lot nicer than it used to be,” he says.

But Fitzgerald wonders if trying to relive Deep Ellum’s livewire heydays is wise. “People still have this lingering image of Deep Ellum,” he says. “It’s hard to recreate that. People have a hard time letting that go... to look forward and seeing what could be.”

Could be? In September, Deep Ellum will have a pair of DART Stations: at Good Latimer Expressway and Gaston Avenue, and Baylor. Metered street parking is free during the day. The Deep Ellum Community Association and the Deep Ellum Foundation are sponsoring a mural project, which over the next few years will brush murals over the neighborhood’s vacant walls and boarded up structures—a revival shot of artistic urban DNA.

“Deep Ellum as a neighborhood is almost in the exact same place as it was in 1985,” says Liles. “It’s nearly desolate. The visual arts community is putting what’s left of the music scene on life support—bands are playing gallery openings. It has come full circle. It’s coming back.” ■

**THE NEW DEEP ELLUM**

*Above, from left: Artist Brad Oldham and Brandon Oldenburg of Reel FX, are collaborating on The Traveling Man, a \$1.365 million sculpture scheduled for installation at the Deep Ellum DART station in late August. Owner Frank Campagna of Kettle Art Gallery and a former club owner, has watched the edgy urban neighborhood revive.*