



SPECIAL TO THE BEE

An illustration from local musician Bill Bixler showing The Wild Blue Yonder music venue that once was a popular spot for local musicians in Fresno's Tower District.

# Remembering Fresno's historic club the Wild Blue at 50 years

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The Wild Blue was an institution among Fresno's musician class.

The nightclub operated out of a spot on Olive and Fulton Avenue for two decades starting in 1974. It was a breeding ground for would-be rock stars, jazz cats and folkies — and a viable tour stop for artists traversing from the Bay Area to Los Angeles.

Its success established a blueprint for future music venues in Fresno (places like Strummer's and Fulton 55) and was a catalyst for an artistic enclave and entertainment hub that would become known as the Tower District.

In a column in 1994, Fresno Bee writer Ken Robinson likened the Blue's closure to a death in the family.

"How do you write an obituary for a nightclub?"

Thirty years on and the Wild Blue remains revered.

To wit: The Valley Music Hall of Fame is honoring the Wild Blue with its first Legacy Award during its 2024 induction ceremony Sept. 25.

## 'THE BLUE WAS IT'

"You can never overestimate the importance of that club," says Glen Delpit, one of the dozens of professional musicians who still performs around town after cutting their teeth on the Wild Blue stage.

Delpit spent a lot of time at



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Fresno musician Glen Delpit looks through an old newspaper showing listings of various local bands who played at The Wild Blue Yonder music venue in the Tower District.

the Blue.

His band, the Houserockers, had a standing New Year's Eve gig at the nightclub from 1986-1990.

It played a three-night run of shows at least once a month through the bulk of the '80s: Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, with crowds lined up down the block.

But Delpit was also at the Blue for shows he booked for the Folk Society, which brought in guys like John Fahey, and for a music and poetry night he helped put together.

He was also there just kind of whenever.

"You could assume you could

go there any night and like the music," Delpit says.

"Everyone who had an original band wanted to play there."

The Blue became a gathering place; its patrons a mix of freaks, geeks, older folks and college kids all coming to see music that ran the gamut from progrock, to folk, blues and new wave.

During its height, recorded performances from the club were broadcast periodically on a local radio show on KFCF and KFSR.

In 1990, the club even hosted its own awards show. Any local musician who performed at the Blue that year was included on

the ballot and could vote for their favorites in a variety of categories, which were mostly broken up by instruments (including horns, both brass and reeds).

Delpit was named musician of the year.

The award is a little dusty, but still on display at his house.

## THE RISE OF THE TOWER DISTRICT

The venue was run by the Bixler brothers, Jim and Bill, and originally conceived as club house for their musical project, Wild Blue Yonder. The band's members pulled their money (\$300 each in the 1970s) to open the spot, mostly so they would have someplace to play.

Per the band's bio: "Disco was a 24/7 nightmare ... the band's future survival was in doubt.

"Utilizing an old maxim by the industrialist Howard Hughes — to be successful in business, you should 'own what you use' — the band arrived at the audacious notion of forming a partnership and creating a performance space dedicated to original music and thought."

Bixler recalled those early days in a column in The Bee in 1997.

"The town still seemed manageable," he wrote.

"The club provided an island of culture, The Tower, a sense of community and charm."

Of course, the club opened before any of the Tower Dis-

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