



Photo by Kevin Walker

Thea Chaplin stands in front of his club, Thea's Rhythm and Blues. The club is located in an increasingly popular section of Liberty Street.

Thea's is city's blues headquarters

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

The long hallway that leads to the heart of Thea's Rhythm and Blues sets the mood for the live music that the club offers most nights. The hallway is plastered with framed pictures of those who made the type of music that Thea's specializes in great. The eyes of Ella Fitzgerald, Robert Johnson and Johnny Taylor stare down at visitors as they make their way into the club, which has all the tell-tale signs of a traditional blues club, from dimmed lights to an unassuming decor.

"Blues and jazz is the heart and soul of the music world," Thea Chaplin said. "This is something I am trying to keep alive."

Chaplin is quickly approaching his four-year anniversary as owner of the club. The Asheville native had owned other clubs in other towns when he decided to try his luck by opening Thea's. At the time, he was an innovator: downtown clubs barely existed and none offered live entertainment other than Thea's.

"Most people's lifestyle right now is putting on a CD and hitting a button and playing music. Live entertainment is where all the music originated from," Chaplin said.

Musicians from far and near have jammed on the Thea's stage. The club's schedule effortlessly blends a variety of R&B genres and a diverse group of acts that have included local performers and blues legends such as Shirley King (BB's daughter) and Clarence Gatemouth Brown. Thea's even has a popular spoken-word poetry event.

Life of Paul Robeson comes to the stage

CHRONICLE STAFF REPORT

Junious Leak brings Paul Robeson to life in "A Prisoner of Passion: The Paul Robeson Story."

Written by Phillip Hayes Dean and directed by and starring Leak, this musical biography pays tribute to the famous athlete, singer actor and civil rights activist who was a staunch supporter of racial equality.

This son of a former slave, who earned an undergraduate degree from Rutgers University and a law degree from Columbia University, became known the world over for his work on the professional theater circuit. His performances in "Othello," "Emperor Jones" and "All God's Chillun Got Wings" garnered

him praise around the country and overseas.

Location: 521 N. Liberty Street
Hours: Wednesday-Saturday 8 p.m. to 2 a.m.

Cover: There is a cover charge (must be 21 years or older; must be 18 or older on spoken-word nights)

Phone number: 722-4195

reduced his schedule to Wednesday through Saturday. Chaplin partly blames the club's location.

Thea's is located along a section of Liberty Street that is still trying to find its character, and unlike Fourth Street, millions of dollars of city money is not being invested to help the area create a niche. But the area is starting to take shape. A new bicycle shop, which hawks high-end bikes, has opened a few buildings down from the club and soon several swanky, and pricey, lofts will open above the bike shop.

Chaplin's love of music sustains him during times when business is light. He wants people to once again take hold of the blues and protect it like the jewel that it is, because, as Chaplin said, "it is dying."

"Keeping live entertainment alive should ... make people (want to) come out," he said. "If you love music, if you love a good clean wholesome atmosphere, then this is the place."

him praise around the country and overseas.

Robeson published his autobiography,

"Here I Stand," during the eight years it took him to resecure his passport, which was revoked by the United States.

"A Prisoner of Passion" is among the NBTF Fringe performances, which highlight the most professional productions from the academic arena.

Venue: WSSU, A.H. Anderson Center
Schedule: Aug. 5 at 7 and 8 p.m.
Price: \$20

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