



## THEATRE HISTORY

Opened 1929, the Music Box Theatre retains its original architecture and design. With a dark blue ceiling, “twinkling stars” and moving cloud formations suggesting a night sky, and walls and towers suggesting an Italian courtyard, patrons are made to feel as if they are watching a film in an open-air Tuscan palazzo.

The Music Box Theatre opened on August 22, 1929, a time when the movie palaces in downtown Chicago each had seating capacities of around 3,000 people. The Music Box, which sat 700, was considered an elaborate little brother to those theatres. Theatre Architecture magazine noted in 1929 that the theatre “represents the smaller, though charming and well equipped, sound picture theatre which is rapidly taking the place of the ‘deluxe’ palace.”

## THE BUILDING

The theatre was built for a cost of \$110,000. The entire building, which also included nine storefronts and 32 apartments, cost \$260,000. The building was designed by Louis I. Simon, a local architect who studied architecture at the Armour Institute in Chicago. The building was erected by The Southport Avenue Businessmen’s Association and operated by Lasker and Sons, who operated several smaller neighborhood houses in Chicago.

## A PERIOD OF INNOVATION

The design of the Music Box was indicative of the growth of the motion picture. The grand movie palaces that preceded it were multiple-use facilities with stage and film presentation capabilities. The Music Box had no stage and, therefore, could only be a film presentation house. When the theatre was built, sound films were a new technology, and the plans included both an orchestra pit and organ chambers in case sound films failed and silent film accompaniment was needed.

## ARCHITECTURAL STYLE

As Chicago Tribune architectural critic Paul Gapp wrote (Arts and Books, July 31, 1983), “The architectural style is an eclectic melange of Italian, Spanish and Pardon-My-Fantasy put together with passion.” The actual style is called “atmospheric”. The dark blue, cove-lit ceiling with “twinkling stars” and moving cloud formations suggests a night sky. The plaster ornamentation of the side walls, round towers, faux-marble loggia and ogee-arched organ chambers are, by Hollywood standards, reminiscent of the walls surrounding an Italian courtyard. Overall the effect is to make the patron feel that they are watching a film in an open air palazzo.

## RESTORATION AND REBIRTH

Between 1977 and 1983, the Music Box was used sporadically for Spanish language films, porno films and lastly, Arabic language films. In 1983, management reopened the theater with a format of double feature revival and repertory films. Eventually, foreign films were reinstated, and independent and cult films were added to the roster. The Music Box Theatre now presents a yearly average of 300 films.

Part of the re-birth included adding a theatre organ, which is played for weekend intermissions, monthly silent films, holiday sing-alongs and special presentations. A large custom electronic organ was installed with the speakers placed in the chambers originally designed for pipes. The irony is that the Music Box is the only theatre in the Chicago area presenting silent films with organ accompaniment on a regular basis, and it began in 1929 playing only sound films.

In 1991, management decided to add a second screen. Rather than split the main theater in two, a small theater was built in an existing storefront adjacent to the lobby. The ambiance of the theatre was designed to echo the architecture of the main auditorium. The feeling is still atmospheric but because of the 13-foot ceiling, the feel is that of sitting under a garden trellis with stars in the night sky beyond.

## **THE THEATRE GHOST**

Old theaters have ghosts and The Music Box is no exception. “Whitey”, as was his neighborhood nick-name, was the manager of The Music Box from opening night 1929 to November 24, 1977. His wife was the cashier and they raised their family two blocks away from the theater. According to one of Whitey’s daughters and his daughter-in-law, he spent most of his time at the theater. Young people who grew up in the neighborhood tell tales of working for Whitey, being tossed out by Whitey and accidentally-on-purpose skinning their knee to get a free piece of candy from Whitey. Parents speak of the embarrassment of having their child’s instamatic photo in the cashier’s station “rogues gallery” of children not allowed back in the theater for any of a myriad of offenses. On Thanksgiving eve, 1977, Whitey returned to close the theater. He fell asleep on the couch in the lobby and never woke up.

Whitey is a tireless protector of The Music Box Theatre. He helps solve problems and has been known to express his opinion of a bad organist by causing the drapery to drop in both organ chambers simultaneously. He is a positive contributor to the audience’s comfort and enjoyment of his theater. He is sometimes felt to be pacing Aisle 4 (protecting the alley doors where kids used to sneak in). If you see him, be sure to say hello and thank him for his 48 years of care and operation of The Music Box and his continued service to the patrons. He is the Manager Emeritus.

## **CURRENT OPERATIONS**

For the last two decades, the Music Box Theatre has been the premiere venue in Chicago for independent and foreign films. It currently has the largest theater space operated full time in the city. The Music Box Theatre is independently owned and operated by the Southport Music Box Corporation. SMBC, through its Music Box Films division, also distributes foreign and independent films in the theatrical, DVD and television markets throughout the United States.

### **MUSIC BOX THEATRE**

3733 N SOUTHPORT AVE | CHICAGO, IL 60613 | 773 871 6604