

Palm Springs' nightclub scene thrived

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

A small article in the Desert Sun in 1969 announced what could only be classified as a rumor: "The reported sale of Ruby's Dunes restaurant, a name synonymous with the early 'movie star retreat' history of Palm Springs, lacked confirmation today but was believed to be an accomplished fact." So, it appeared in the paper. The buyer was the owner of the Beverly Hills Hotel. The seller, Irwin Rubenstein of Palm Springs was out of the city and could not be contacted for verification of the transaction.

By the time of the sale in the late 1960s the nightclub scene in Palm Springs was changing. Ruby's Dunes was one of many thriving nighttime entertainment venues available in the desert community. That a small town in the desert could support nightclubs at all was surprising.

The first was Freeman's Desert Grill opened in 1936 by Jack Freeman. It started as little more than a small bar in an even smaller building. Freeman's partner, another Irwin, (but not Rubenstein,) Schuman, took over by 1938. Renaming the place, the Chi Chi, in a cheeky nod to the topeless Tahitian painting of a pretty maiden entitled "Hina Rapa." Schuman produced the image on everything: the advertising for the club, the dinner plates, playing cards, matchbooks and napkins.

The Chi Chi was wildly successful and expanded multiple times. The Starlite Room addition opened in October 1948 with Desi Arnaz and his orchestra performing. The room could seat 750 people. The adjacent Blue Room could seat 250 for dinner. Schuman was innovative, hiring the first house band in Palm Springs, lead by drummer Bill Alexander. Stars were drawn to the venue and notables such as Nat King Cole, Milton Berle, Lena Horne, Ella Fitzgerald, and Louis Armstrong graced the stage.

Audience regulars included Bob Hope, Lucille Ball, Jerry Lewis, and Frank Sinatra and were known to sit in with the band, or be invited onto the stage by their

See **NIGHTCLUBS**, Page 30A

That a small town in the desert could support nightclubs at all was surprising.



Jimmy Van Heusen, a famous composer, Frank Sinatra and Irwin "Ruby" Rubenstein attended the opening of Ruby's Dunes nightclub. ©2018 PALM SPRINGS LIFE PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.



Ruby's Dunes was one of many thriving nighttime entertainment venues available in the desert community in the 1960s. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

Nightclubs

Continued from Page 29A

friends who were performing. Everyone got into the act. Sinatra was well-acquainted with the nighttime hot spots in the desert. Frank liked to dine with friends and take in the show. Known to change a lyric to mention his favorite haunts, many a tune sung by Frank featured a reference to Patsy's or Jilly's, his favorite New York joints. Jilly Rizzo opened Jilly's in Palm Springs in 1965, and moved permanently to the desert with Frank, adding to the nightclub offerings here.

In 1959, Schuman and his brother Mark, bought forty acres of land at the corner of Indian Avenue and Vista Chino and moved north to build the Riviera Hotel. It's spectacular opening was the toast of the town. It expanded – again – the nighttime scene.

Frank Sinatra also frequented the Purple Room. The name wasn't as easy to drop into a lyric as Jilly's though. The Purple Room was the site of the Rat Pack's desert adventures before moving to the bigger stage of Las Vegas. Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr. and Frank Sinatra often clowned it up on its diminutive stage, crashing the scheduled act. The saloon is said to be the place where Sinatra proposed to Barbara Marx in 1976.

The exuberance and glamour of the 1950s and 1960s were fading by the 70s. When Schuman sold the Chi Chi in 1961 it signaled the beginning of the end. The club changed hands multiple times, was used for a variety of ignominious schemes until demolished to make way for the expansion of the Desert Fashion Plaza. Rubenstein's rumored transaction in 1969 of the sale of the Dunes followed the Chi Chi. Many other famous clubs of the previous decades struggled and were sold and closed.

Today, the supper club of the midcentury however survives and perseveres at AJ's on the Green. Tucked into the middle of mobile home community in a small corner of Cathedral City, and surrounded by a golf course, AJ's on the Green would be easily recognizable to any member of the Rat Pack as a worthy nightclub. There's a house band led by guitarist Doug MacDonald. Bill Marx, pianist and son of Harpo Marx, has performed there too. The nightly entertainment is reminiscent of the best of the old Palm Springs clubs. And you never know who might sit in.

SULLIVAN'S
SHUTTER FACTORY
CHRISTMAS
SHUTTER
SALE
100% OFF

GOT UGLY FURNITURE?
WE CAN CREATE A NEW LOOK WITH YOUR OLD PATIO FURNITURE FOR ABOUT 1/2 THE COST OF NEW!

NEW SLINGS

NEW STRAPS