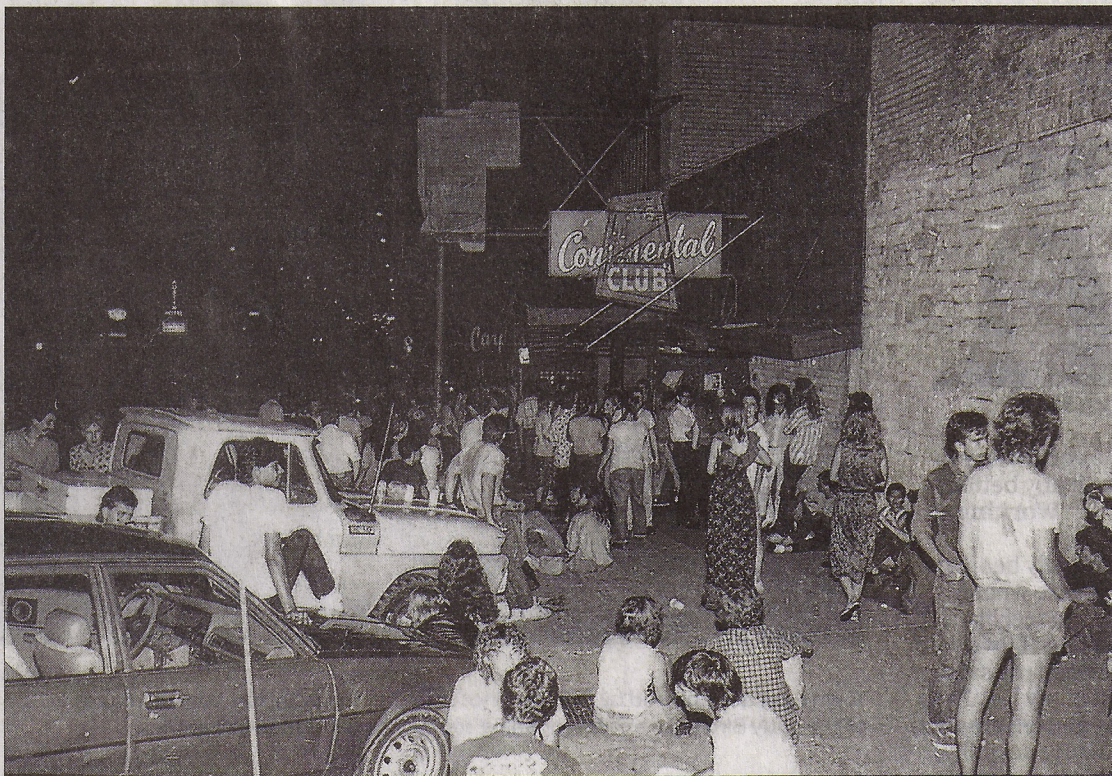


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## MUSIC



Casey Monahan/1987 American-Statesman

The Continental Club circa 1987 was a popular place to be, even if you couldn't get in. The first iteration of the Continental closed 25 years ago in a thunderclap of loud rock 'n' roll music that to this day makes it a favorite of those old enough to remember it. The modern Continental Club will turn 25 on New Years Eve.

# A closing set that still reverberates



# Continental Club's roots rock reputation is rooted in history of loud music, cool crowds

By Michael Corcoran

Special to the American-Statesman

Three times as many people were outside the 300-capacity club than were able to fit inside, where it was brutally hot and gloriously sweaty. Sitting in little clumps on the sidewalk and standing in the street behind the stage, the throng drank 7-Eleven beer, smoked joints and reminisced about nights spent in the black wooden box where Bad Brains would play one night and Lou Ann Barton the next. And you'd go to both.

A club you'd go to even if you've never heard of the band, the Continental Club closed its doors for good on Aug. 29, 1987. It was replaced on New Year's Eve, four months later, by the Continental Club, no relation.

After a bumpy first year as a yupscale hamburger/music joint, the Continental of Steve

## GRULKEFEST: A CELEBRATION OF BRENT

**What:** A tribute to South by Southwest creative director Brent Grulke.

Proceeds go to the Graham Grulke Education Fund to benefit Grulke's 7-year-old son. With Doctors' Mob, Fastball, Glass Eye, the Reivers, Sixteen Deluxe, True Believers, the Wannabes, Wild Seeds and more.

**When:** Music starts at 6 p.m. Sept. 8.

**Where:** ACL Live, 310 W. Second St.

**Cost:** \$20 to \$35.

**Information:** [acl-live.com](http://acl-live.com)

Wertheimer and his veteran staff has grown into a beloved roots-rock haven. A house built on loyalty, the Continental Club is where Toni Price's Tuesday "Hippie Hour"

is now in its 20th year. Austin's two greatest meat-eating guitarists, Redd Volkaert and Junior Brown, are known to play there on weekends when the sun is out; How cool is that?

The Continental that opened 25 years ago is an Austin landmark known the world over. But the Continental that closed 25 years ago is the one many local night-lifers of a certain age would call their favorite club ever. Leaning against the back wall, with a \$2 beer, was a 28-year-old's natural body position.

For a room that had the ambiance of a milk crate, the Continental was a magical place because of what happened onstage. My first night in Austin, April 1, 1984, I wandered in off South Congress Avenue, paid a \$3 cover, and saw a band I had never heard of called the Butthole Surfers.

**Continental** continued on F9



# Club will celebrate its roots on New Years

## Continental

Continued from F1

For the next three years I'd see so many great shows: accordionist Steve Jordan, the Replacements, Johnny Thunders, the Skeletons, Billy Bragg, Alex Chilton, Del Fuegos and on and on. But the cozy confines ruled by Mark Pratz and J'Net Ward had become especially known as the clubhouse for the "New Sincerity" bands — True Believers, Zeitgeist, Glass Eye, Doctors' Mob, Wild Seeds, Texas Instruments, Dharma Bums, Daniel Johnston, Black Spring and more. These bands, many of whom are regrouping Sept. 8 for a tribute to South by Southwest creative director Brent Grulke, also forged a scene at the Beach (now Crown & Anchor), but that was more of a cool hangout. The no-frills Continental Club was where you went to get a face full of music, and former soundman Grulke, who died of a heart attack Aug. 13 at age 51, was known to mix it loud. Conversation? Take it outside.

The repete as a rockin' live room started in 1979, when the owners of the infamous One Knite (at current Stubb's location) looked for a place to move the party and teamed with behind-the-scenesters Summerdog and Wayne Nagel to take over the lease at 1315 S. Congress Ave. During the '60s and the first ninetenths of the '70s, the club was a dank, old-man's bar, with happy hour from 7 to 9 a.m.

The new owners liked Chuck Berry-based rock 'n' roll, and so they'd



Casey Monahan/American-Statesman 1987

Zeitgeist performs at the Continental Club with Rich Brotherton, Kathy McCarty and Mike Hall joining in. Zeitgeist was a regular at the original Continental, even landing a gig at the last show there before its closure in August 1987.

book acts such as the LeRoi Brothers, Little Charlie (Sexton), Joe Ely Band and the Cobras with Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Mark and J'Net took over in 1983 and kicked up the national bookings, while keeping the focus on local acts that could draw crowds. A club reflects the personality of the ownership, and in Pratz and Ward, who also ran Liberty Lunch, the bands and clientele got an ever-smiling pair open to nutty things. The club was a playground, so Pratz was well prepared when he became an elementary school principal.

The beloved rock-in-a-box closed, just five months after the launch of SXSW, because it wasn't making money and it took time and attention from Liberty Lunch, which was three times bigger at half the rent.

A club the size of the Lunch was needed for the Continental Club's swan song. I don't think I ever got in, but the vibe outside was so cool. The doors were open, the music was playing and everyone in the periphery was all peace and love — until the True Believers

arrived at the club's back door like gunslingers.

Alejandro Escovedo's glamericana band would've been the undisputed king of the scene except for the existence of Zeitgeist (which later became the Reivers). Zeitgeist made better records than the True Believers. They had better songs and a unique vocal dynamic. Their fans were more devoted.

What the True Believers had was raw power. They dressed like rock stars while everyone else was in tees and jeans, and they carried on for their heroes: Iggy, T-Rex, Velvet Underground, Mott the Hoople.

That final night, the advertised lineup was Doctors' Mob, Glass Eye, Wild Seeds and headliner Zeitgeist. True Believers had another gig booked, but, thanks to the generosity of Zeitgeist, they would play at the very end. With Grulke (dressed in drag, as were the members of Wild Seeds) at the sound board, the swaggering True Believers were so excruciatingly loud that folks in the street needed earplugs. It was 20 minutes of ego,

volume and aggression, with the TB gang out to conquer Zeitgeist's John Croslin and company, once and forever. Instead they blew out Zeitgeist's amps after about four songs. Lasting memory from loadout: Croslin talking to TB bassist J.D. Foster about paying for the amps and Foster shrugging, "Hey, man, that's rock 'n' roll."

In the fall of '87, Wertheimer was asked if he wanted to take over a nightclub on the seedy South Congress strip. He was running Ski Shores, a hamburger joint on Lake Austin, with his mentor C-Boy Parks and club veteran Hank Vick.



The Schuler family, who owned the building at 1315 S. Congress, were regular customers and pitched the vacant club.

"I wasn't sure I wanted to get involved," says Wertheimer, "but Hank was all gung ho and he kinda charmed me into it." The lease called for \$1,150 a month in rent, with an option to buy the building within a year for \$125,000, but the club was barely staying afloat. "After that first year, I got rid of the kitchen and put in a pool table and things started slowly turning around," said Wertheimer, who eventually bought the building for a lot more than \$125,000.

Working without a partner after year one, Wertheimer put the Continental back on the nightlife map by booking an act that was a strange mix of Ernest Tubb and Jimi Hendrix to play for free every Sunday night. In the first few weeks, Junior Brown barely drew 10 customers, but when the word got out about this sensationally unique guitarist, folks started lining up an hour before the doors opened.

Then, such touring acts as the Palladins and Dave Alvin from the West Coast, the Iguanas from New Orleans and Southern Culture On the Skids from the East Coast made the Continental a favorite stop.

Today, the neon Continental sign is a symbol of Austin cool. It's the original from 1955, when Morin Scott owned the

building and jazz musician Bill Turner ran the Continental Club as a "private" saloon so they could serve mixed drinks. Turner's jazz trio was the house band, with various guest singers. The Sunday night jam session brought out some of the area's best jazz musicians.

We can all marvel at what the Continental has become, especially with the addition of the Continental Gallery upstairs.

There's an amazing vibe on a hot night, and if the Continental Club closed at the end of the month, you can be sure there would be a thousand people outside, just to be there.

Instead of a closing, there will be an anniversary. The Wertheimer Continental Club turns 25 on New Year's Eve.

That building at 1315 S. Congress Ave. is a special, special place; the home of not one, but two, legendary nightclub runs.

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Writer Michael Corcoran has been covering Austin music since 1984, including 16 years for the *American Statesman*.