St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission
Individual Property Designation Form

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825 University Avenue
St. Paul, Minnesota
SHPO Inv. # RA-SPC-3892

Address: 825 University Avenue

Historic Name: Victoria Theater
Common or Current Name: Victoria Theater

PROPERTY IDENTIFICATION

PIN: 352 923 130 198

SHPO Inventory #: RA-SPC-3892
Property Type: Commercial
Legal Description: S35 T29R R23W
(Syndicate No. 1 Addition, Lot 24, Block 4)
Ward: 1, Precinct 4
Planning District: 7
U.S.G.S. Map: St. Paul West 7.5

HISTORICAL ABSTRACT

Building Permit #:

Construction Date: 1915
Subsequent: 1924

Architect: Franklin Ellerbe
Builder: Edward Bjorklund
Moved:
Original Address:

Original Owner: Henry Breilein
Subsequent: Twin Cities Amusement Company, John Muska, Bee Vue

Historic Uses: movie theater, nightclub/restaurant, lighting fixture store

DESCRIPTION

Style: Beaux Arts
Building Type: theater
No. of Stories: 1, with balcony
Plan: rectangular
Roof Type: flat with parapet
Roof Material:
Structural System: brick, steel beam and frame
Foundation: cast in place concrete
Façade Material: brick and terra-cotta
Additional:

Outbuildings:
Other contributing features:

VISUAL ASSESSMENT

Exterior Condition: very good
Exterior historic Integrity: very good
Surrounding Land Uses:

DESCRIPTION STATEMENT

The Victoria Theater building is located in the Frogtown Neighborhood in Planning District 7, on the north side of University Avenue between Victoria and Avon Streets. Adjacent to the east is the Raths, Mills and Bell, Inc. Building, which the property investigations for the CCLRT Project have recommended as eligible for the NRHP.

The Victoria Theater building is a rectangular brick and frame building, with a brick and terra-cotta façade. This large front façade is done in the Beaux Arts style and consists of wire screeded brick, laid in a broad, herringbone pattern surrounding a square arch, or portal, two stories high. The edge of this portal is custom-fabricated tan terra cotta border with a shaped parapet. Iron fixtures visible on the façade are probably anchors for a marquee; if so, it is uncertain when the marquee was removed.

The interior consists of an original concrete sloping floor now overlaid with a level floor. The roof is supported on a series of 24-inch-deep steel beams supported on pilasters expressed on the inside of the theater. The pilasters are each capped with rectangular capitals of overlaid scroll saw fretwork incorporating a lyre motif in an excellent state of preservation. Portions of an original balcony area remain in the south end, and portions remain of a second floor in the north end, presumably added during a 1924 redesign. Hand-painted landscape scenes in the top several feet of the balcony area are also substantially intact. Parts of the original proscenium arch are intact.

SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

Period of Significance: 1915-1930
St. Paul Historic Contexts: Neighborhood Commercial Centers: 1874-1960
St. Paul Heritage Preservation Criteria/Criterion: 1, 2, 4, 5, and 7

(1) The Victoria Theater is significant due to its unique and prominent role in *The Anthology of American Folk Music*, an important document in the musical development of the United States. The Victoria has substantial interest and value as the site of a Prohibition-era nightclub in St. Paul, and vividly exemplifies consequential developments in the heritage and culture of St. Paul. These associations were unrecognized during all previous evaluations of the building.

(2) In addition to its close association with a significant recording in America's musical history, the Victoria was the subject of at least two Prohibition-era Federal actions that made front-page headlines across the region and was the subject of editorials in major newspapers. These Federal actions, including a high-profile raid, placed the Victoria at the center of tensions between local opinion and the 18th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The Victoria was therefore the site of interesting historical events in both the cultural development of the United States and the political history of the alcoholic beverage industry in St. Paul. These associations were previously unrecognized.

(4) The building is architecturally significant. One of only three other St. Paul theater buildings of this early date, the Victoria is unique in that much of its exterior and interior are intact, including its original screen and projection booth. The façade of the theatre is done in the Beaux Arts style, a style which was already popular for burlesque halls, operas, and other theaters, and which often incorporated great arches (or portals) dominating the façade. This grand portal concept derived from exposition buildings such as that of the Paris Exposition of 1889, the Petit Palais of 1900 (Paris), and the Festival Hall at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. The portal of the Victoria Theater is edged with a custom-fabricated, terra cotta band, each piece of which is a remarkable expression of the esthetic of the turn of the century.

(5) This building is also significant because it is one of few examples of the work of Franklin Ellerbe in St. Paul, his hometown. Ellerbe founded an important architectural firm that grew under his son Thomas Ellerbe's direction to be, at one point, the second largest in the United States. The Ellerbes, as a father-and-son architectural firm, are part of a small group of multi-generational architectural firms in St. Paul, which include Cass Gilbert, Clarence Johnston, and Edward Bassford. The Victoria Theater is an important historical component in the evolving understanding of the contribution of these firms.

(7) Preserving 825 University is important to the preservation of the adjacent historic building, which is recommended to be eligible for the NRHP by the property investigations for the CCLRT Project. Both buildings are important, coeval parts of the street façade of University Avenue. Their original functions (film production and exhibition) represent a cutting-edge industry in their era and, together, they speak volumes about street life in the teens and twenties along University Avenue. [1]

History of the Victoria Theater

The Victoria Theater was built in 1915 as one of three silent-movie houses owned by Henry J. Breilein along University Avenue.[2] North-south streetcar lines built along Snelling in 1905 and Dale in 1914 gave impetus to business development along the existing University line and allowed area residents easy access to the Victoria's location from all directions.[3]

The Victoria Building was designed by Franklin Ellerbe, founder of the nationally renowned St. Paul architectural firm Ellerbe Architects. Franklin Ellerbe-designed buildings on the NRHP include his 1913 First National Bank in Mankato and the 1916 William Mayo residence. His 1914 Mayo Clinic building redefined medical architecture and, along with the Ellerbe firm's 1928 Plummer Building, is designated as a National Historic Landmark.[4]

The Victoria building was remodeled in December 1924 as the Victoria Café, a dance hall featuring cabaret-style floorshows and Chinese cuisine. For at least the first year of operation, the Victoria Café advertised weekly in the *American Jewish World* newspaper, and had a predominantly Jewish staff.[5] The venue presumably was at least partly financed by the entertainment firm Twin Cites Amusement Corporation, owned by the theater firm Finkelstein and Ruben. [6]

In 1927, as part of the first commercial label recording sessions held in the Upper Midwest, the house orchestra of the Victoria Café recorded *Moonshiner's Dance* for Gennett Records.[7] This dance record was included on a 1952 collection of reissued commercial recordings, *The Anthology of American Folk Music*, which became an influential document in the development of post-WWII ideas and institutions of American folk arts.[8]

The association of the Victoria building with the *Anthology* appears to have been entirely unrecognized prior to May 2006,[9] and has not been taken into account in any previous historical surveys or recommendations. The recording is unique among the *Anthology's* 84 selections, in that it is the only selection unambiguously from outside the American South. It is also the only cut featuring either jazz instrumentation or immigrant ethnic musical forms.

Moonshiner's Dance is a jazz-inflected polka instrumental with vocal interjections.[10] Made several days after the closing of the 1927 Minnesota State Fair, it suggests motifs of urban/rural encounter in the Upper Midwest, and of overt defiance of the 18th Amendment. *Moonshiner's Dance* is therefore of interest as a representation of St. Paul's civic identity in a regional context. It is also unusual for its various suggestions of unseen stage activity, such as storytelling by the company's dancers and choreography performed by the band, and is a rare and vivid window on the offerings of a St. Paul nightclub stage during Prohibition.

Taken together, *Moonshiner's Dance* and the Victoria building itself might provide valuable, mutually reinforcing information about the cultural history of St Paul. For

example, the surviving murals visible in the balcony area depict rural lakes and woodlands alongside the capitals of the theater's columns – a juxtaposition reminiscent of the urban/outstate motif of *Moonshiner's Dance*.

The Victoria Café was a prominent participant in the political history of Prohibition in St. Paul. Two controversial actions by Federal officials put the Victoria Café in front-page headlines across the region and made it the subject of editorials in multiple newspapers. Roughly 10 weeks after the recording of *Moonshiners Dance*, a padlock injunction was filed in December 1927 against the Victoria and three other Twin Cities venues under a recent US Supreme Court decision allowing business closures based on the sale of non-alcoholic "set-ups." This justification drew criticism and derision in the local press as "banning the chaser."[11] A December 1928 raid resulted in a physical altercation between Federal agents and a former Assistant Ramsey County Attorney, Allan M. McGill. The tactics used by officers in this raid precipitated a heated front-page dispute between the U.S. Congressman from Minnesota's 4th district, Melvin J. Maas, and Federal Prohibition authorities in Minnesota and Washington, DC. Andrew Volstead, whose name was virtually synonymous with Prohibition, was prominent in the dispute. [12]

The Victoria Café Orchestra's thematic use of St. Paul's alcoholic beverage trade is of cultural interest and presumably contributed to the Victoria's role in *The Anthology of American Folk Music*. The Victoria Café also became a prominent participant in the political history of Prohibition in St. Paul during one of that history's most formative moments. The building represents the earliest intact neighborhood theater in St. Paul, and is the work of one of St. Paul's most prominent architects.

The Victoria apparently owes its origins to business development encouraged by the installation of street car lines in the Dale and University area. Today, interest in preserving and restoring the Victoria Building is increasing due to LRT development along the Central Corridor.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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"U.S. Orders 'Personal' Dry Raid Inquiry: Treasury Official Assures Maas of Thorough Sift On Alleged High-Handed Action" *St. Paul Daily News*, January 3, 1929, 1.

"Victoria Theater (RA-SPC-3892), 825 University Avenue, Saint Paul: National Register Evaluation." *Supplemental Historic Property Investigations and Evaluations for CCLRT Project: Midway East*. St. Paul, MN: Hess, Roise and Company, n.d.

DATE OF FORM: December 3, 2009

PREPARED BY: Kurt Gegenhuber and Thomas Blanck,
with assistance from the Thomas/Dale District 7 Planning Council and residents.

PHOTO I.D.:
Roll:
Frame:

FOOTNOTES

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[1] "Raths, Mills and Bell, Inc. (Ray-Bell Films) Building, 823 University Avenue, Saint Paul: National Register Evaluation," *Supplemental Historic Property Investigations and Evaluations for CCLRT Project: Midway East* (St. Paul, MN: Hess, Roise and Company, n.d.). A photo from Ray-Bell Films was recently featured at Minnesota Historic Preservation Office, MNHS, Minnesota Preservation Planner (Winter 2009): 1.

[2] For previous evaluations, Betsy H. Bradley, Jennifer L. Bring, and Andrea Vermeer, "Victoria Theater, RA-SPC-3892," *Phase II Architectural History Investigation for the Proposed Central Transit Corridor, Hennepin And Ramsey Counties*. (St. Paul, MN: The 106 Group Ltd., 2004). The CCLRT investigations were updated and supplemented with "Victoria Theater (RA-SPC-3892), 825 University Avenue, Saint Paul: National Register Evaluation," *Supplemental Historic Property Investigations and Evaluations for CCLRT Project: Midway East* (St. Paul, MN: Hess, Roise and Company, n.d.).

[3] J. W. Diers, and A. Isaacs. *Twin Cities by Trolley: The Streetcar Era in Minneapolis and St. Paul* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 2007).

[4] Thomas Farr Ellerbe, *The Ellerbe Tradition: Seventy Years of Architecture and Engineering* (Minneapolis: Ellerbe, Inc., 1980); also, "100 Years of Real Sustainability: History Timeline," *Ellerbe-Becket* (website: www.ellerbebecket.com/100/timeline.html, 2009).

[5] Permits on file at Ramsey Co. Historical Society confirm renovation work at this time. The Café's premier is announced in *The Saint Paul Musician*, November 1924, 5, and December 1924, 24. Weekly advertisements appear in *American Jewish World* from December 19, 1924 to December 25, 1925, but rarely thereafter.

[6] Record of sub-permits, on file at Ramsey Co. Historical Society. See also *Supplemental Investigations* for the CCLRT Project. Various circumstantial evidence from city directories and *The Saint Paul Musician* supports a connection to Finkelstein & Ruben.

[7] For an example of local coverage of these sessions, see "Phonograph Recording in St. Paul Begins with Erickson Orchestra," *St. Paul Daily News*, May 29, 1927, 1. For a label overview, Stephen M. Stroff, "Gennett Records: The label that changed history," *Antiques & Collecting*, June 1989, 73-77. Company ledgers from 1927 are on file in the John K. MacKenzie Collection (accession 1985.0617, collection M 0428 OM 0133) at the Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, IN.

[8] A collection of essays on the importance of the *Anthology* was edited for the expanded liner notes to the reissue on CD, *A Booklet of Essays, Appreciations, and Annotations Pertaining to the Anthology of American Folk Music* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways, 1997). A well-balanced evaluation of the *Anthology* can be found in Neil. V. Rosenberg, "*The Anthology of American Folk Music* and working-class music," *Labour/Le Travail* (Fall 1998): 327-332. Noteworthy interpretive discussions include

Greil Marcus, *Old Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (New York, NY: Picador, 2001); and. Robert Cantwell, "Smith's Memory Theater: The Great Folkways Anthology," *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[9] Local amateur historian Kurt Gegenhuber seems to have discovered the connection between the Victoria Building and the *Anthology of American Folk Music*. A discussion, tailored to support recent preservation efforts, is at "Moonshiner's Parking Lot? A Piece of St. Paul's Cultural History May Be Torn Down for a Parking Lot," *The Celestial Monochord* (website: www.celestialmonochord.org/2009/10/moonshiners-parking-lot.html, October 19, 2009).

[10] This analysis refers to Gennett 6305, a commercially released 78-rpm record. Side A was reissued on *The Anthology of American Folk Music*, and side B has never been reissued. A study copy of the audio can be made available to the Commission.

[11] Coverage was widespread, e.g., "Café Men Deny 'Setups' Sales: Prepare to Fight Charges of Prohibition Chief in Padlock Move," *Minneapolis Daily Star*, December 17, 1927, 2. For a wry editorial, see "Banning the Chaser," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, December 31, 1927, 6.

[12] Virtually every paper across the region ran stories on the 1928 Victoria raid, with major Twin Cities papers following the controversy for months. For one example, "Drys Seize Six Café Guests in 'Personal' Raid: Victoria Patrons Jailed, May Be Charged With Possession of Liquor," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, December 31, 1928, 1-2. For an example of the involvement of high officials, see "U.S. Orders 'Personal' Dry Raid Inquiry: Treasury Official Assures Maas of Thorough Sift On Alleged High-Handed Action," *St. Paul Daily News*, January 3, 1929, 1.