

## Dessau Hall Austin, TX

Dessau, Texas was a small town located eleven miles northeast of Austin and two miles southwest of Pflugerville in northeastern Travis County. Settled by German immigrants in the latter half of the 19th century it was named after the city of Dessau in Germany.<sup>1</sup> Dessau Hall, located at 13422 Dessau Road, was a two story building built by the locals in 1876 as a venue for (traditional polka) dancing and (German) music. It was the site of many German May Fete celebrations and other family events.<sup>2</sup>



The Dessau Band of the 1890s  
Photo courtesy Martha Sessom and [Community Impact](#)

Though the population of Dessau itself rarely ever grew above fifty the hall was a popular attraction and drew crowds from Austin and surrounding communities. By the 1930s and 1940s, dancing to the sound of big bands was popular. Some of the well-known bands that played Dessau Hall during this era included Harry James, Glen Miller, Guy Lombardo, Tommy Dorsey, Artie Shaw, Stan Kenton and Woody Herman. The original structure burned down in the early 1940s, and a new single-story building was erected at the same location.<sup>2</sup>

The new hall was known for a tree that grew in the center of the dance floor. According to Joe W. Neal, a retired professor of intercultural communication at The University of Texas, "It was one of the most popular entertainment spots at that time. I remember when we returned from the war in 1945, everyone headed to Dessau Hall to dance and listen to the big bands."<sup>2</sup>



Hank Williams at Dessau Hall - 1950  
Photo courtesy Jim Grebowksi and [The Austin Chronicle](#)

As country and western music became popular artists like Bob Wills, Hank Williams, Ernest Tubb and Charlie Louvin performed at Dessau Hall. Jimmy Heap, a western swing band leader from Taylor, Texas, along with his band the Melody Makers played there on Saturday nights broadcasting over radio [KTBC](#) in Austin.<sup>3</sup> KTBC was owned by then-Senator Lyndon Johnson and his wife Lady Bird.

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Jimmy Heap (2nd from left) and the Melody Makers

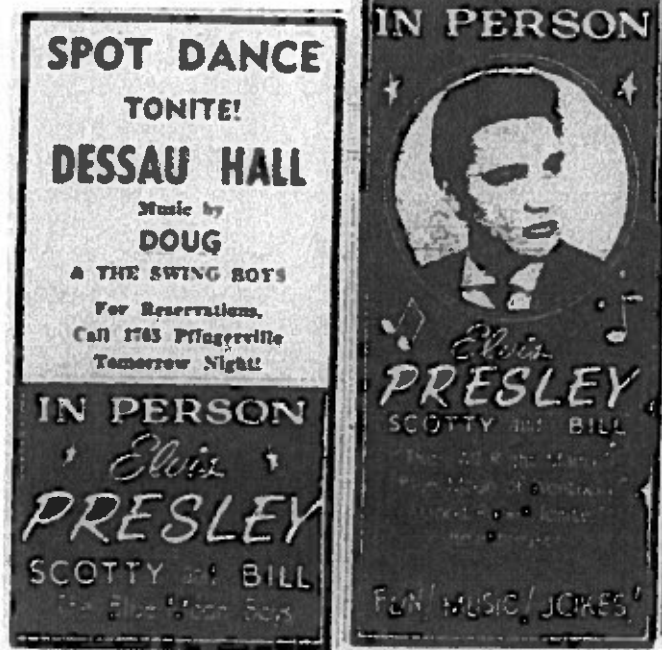
Photo courtesy [Chesman, Clifton's Center](#)

Heap's first recording was a song written by band member Horace Barnett called "*The Dessau Hall Waltz*." The response after they started playing it on their radio program every afternoon at KTAE in Taylor was so great it eventually led to a contract with Imperial Records. They would later have a hit with Eddie Miller's "*Release Me*."



December 1952 ads for the Skyline and Dessau Hall in Austin Statesman  
courtesy [Copperfield Area - Northeast Austin Historical Notes](#)

According to Billboard, D.R. Price was the owner and operator of Dessau Hall and that November had announced a new "Western Music policy" there where once a month they would book a name band, though the club never became exclusively country. On December 19, 1952 Dessau Hall featured the big band sound of Shep Fields and his Rippling Rhythm while the same night, less than a few miles away, Hank Williams made his last ever public performance at the Skyline Club. By 1953 Red Jones at KVET in Austin was promoting weekly dances at the Hall.<sup>4</sup>



Ads from March 16 and 17, 1955 in the Austin Statesman  
 Courtesy [Austin History Center](#)

On March 17, 1955, Elvis, Scotty and Bill performed at Dessau Hall. This date was the week before the band made their first trip to New York to audition for the Arthur Godfrey's Talent show and according to Peter Guralnick in Elvis Day by Day the dates this month were booked by Bob Neal.



Scotty, Elvis and Bill at Dessau Hall - Mar. 17, 1955  
 Photo courtesy [Gerrit Rijff](#)



Scotty, Elvis and Bill at Dessau Hall - Mar. 17, 1955  
Photo courtesy Ger J. Rijk



Scotty, Elvis and Bill at Dessau Hall - Mar. 17, 1955  
Photo courtesy Sigve Bonner



Scotty, Elvis and Bill at Dessau Hall - Mar. 17, 1955

Photo courtesy Steve Bomer

Earlier that month they had returned to the studio and recorded both a slow and an up-tempo version of "*I'm left, you're right, she's gone*" which was the first time drums were used on one of their recordings. They were played by Jimmie Lott, who happened to also be the first non member of the Blue Moon Boys to record with them, though some accounts suggest that Doug Poindexter of the Wranglers may have played rhythm guitar on *Just Because* in September of 54.



Elvis with a fan at Dessau Hall - Mar. 17, 1955

Photo courtesy Ger J. Rijff



Elvis at Dessau Hall - Mar. 17, 1955

Photo courtesy Ger J. Rijk

It was the first of only four appearances by the band in Austin (or its outskirts in this instance). By their next appearance in town, at the Austin Sportcenter the following August, they would have DJ with them, who not long after through the efforts of Scotty and Bill would become a full time member of the band. The club would later host acts like Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, Willie Nelson, George Strait, Merle Haggard, Don Walser and many more.



Elvis with fans outside Dessau Hall - Mar. 17, 1955

Photo courtesy Ger J. Rijk





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In 1967 Dessau Hall burned to the ground again but was rebuilt again in 1969 by Arkie Sawyer and Leona Kincl. The new club featured chandeliers, red velvet wallpaper and the largest floating wood dance floor in Texas at 3,000 square feet. The tree unfortunately did not survive the fire.



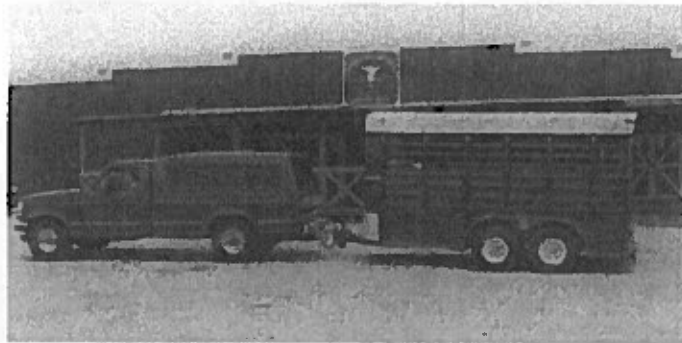
Jack Green, Hub Sutter, Johnny Bush, Tiny Smith and Floyd Tillman - Jan 1957

Photo courtesy Wired For Sound (added July 2, 2011)



Louisiana Hayride alumni David Houston receives a poster signed by fans as a Valentine at the Hall from Jerry Green, program director at KOKE - Apr. 24, 1971

Photo courtesy Billboard



Dessau Dance Hall in 1998

Photo courtesy wsbphoto

The 1500 capacity hall was bought by the Persinger brothers in 1997 who scrapped the chandeliers and velvet wallpaper. Over the next few years the club as a Tejano Nightspot or frat hangout under one theme or another was filled most nights with a lineup that ran from blues to rock to country, with a heavy accent on local talent. Though in a few years it too would be empty again.<sup>2</sup>



Aerial view of building at 13422 Dessau Rd. Austin, TX - 2008

Photo courtesy Microsoft Earthdata



Aerial view of building at 13422 Dessau Rd. Austin, TX - 2008

Photo courtesy Microsoft Earthdata

The building was purchased in May of 2009 by Robin Bagley of East Texas who refurbished it in the tradition of the old Dessau Hall with a similar look and feel as its glory days.<sup>2</sup>



Dessau Hall refurbished - 2009

Photo courtesy Google Streetview



The New Dessau Hall dance floor and stage - 2009

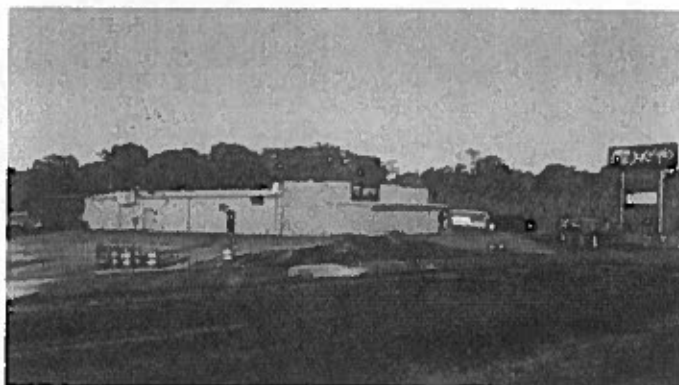
Photo courtesy The New Denny Hall MySpace



The New Dessau Hall Dance floor and stage - 2009

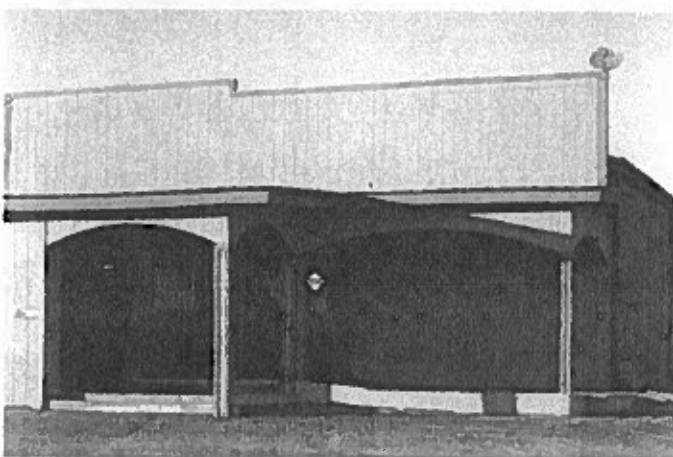
Photo courtesy The New Dessau Hall MySpace

The walls were painted red to mirror the original red velvet walls, and many of the old light fixtures were found in storage, polished and rewired for use again. Red velvet curtains hung on the stage, and old newspaper clippings found at the hall were framed and hung on the walls. The old chandelier was found hanging from the rafters above the dropped ceiling, refurbished and hang over the refinished dance floor. They held a grand opening on June 13, 2009 with a capacity crowd and a line around the building waiting to get in.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately the club was again closed by the following year.



El Gran Mexicano night club (former Dessau Hall) at 13422 Dessau Road - Oct. 14, 2010

Photo © James V. Roy



No Gang Clothing Inside - Dress Code Strictly Enforced - Oct. 14, 2010

Photo © James V. Roy

Today the town of Dessau has been swallowed up by Austin's urban sprawl but the main remaining landmark is the dancehall building at the intersection of Dessau and Howard. Though once remote, the location is now a rather heavily populated residential and industrial area. The former dance hall is currently the El Gran Mexicano Night club and open only a few nights a week.

page added December 15, 2010

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- <sup>1</sup> according to Texas Post Offices by County by John J. Germann and Myron Janzen, courtesy [The Handbook of Texas Online](#)  
<sup>2</sup> courtesy "[Dessau Hall Reopens](#)" by Pam Stephenson, Community Impact Newspaper - Aug 7, 2009  
<sup>3</sup> according to [Jimmy Heap Interview with Ray Campi](#) courtesy [Electric Earl](#)  
<sup>4</sup> according to Billboard Magazine July 19, 1952, Nov. 29, 1952 and Jan. 31, 1953  
<sup>5</sup> according to [Texas Live Music Venues Opened before 1980](#) courtesy Texas Music Office  
<sup>6</sup> according to [Copperfield Area - Northeast Austin Historical Notes](#)

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