

***Tune In Tonight***  
**Shenanigans In Lawrence**

In the fall of 1975, I entered the William Allen White Journalism School at the University of Kansas. What an exciting time to be 19, and living away from home for the first time. I found Lawrence and KU to be the prototype of the quintessential college community at the time—A great place to be with over 20,000 students your age.

Disco, with its elementary and repetitive beat, was just becoming popular in its very short existence, coinciding exactly with my college years. Word had gotten around that a group of investors had bought the bowling alley just off campus, next to late-night student-diet staple, Joe's Donuts. I thought, "*They will need a DJ, I know popular music, and I like donuts.*"

One day during my freshman year, after class, I went to the former bowling alley, which was under re-construction. The manager, Joe, was there with the construction crew. I told him I wanted to be the DJ, and even though my only experience was a few days of working at the student station KJHK, I got the job on the spot. Then I got nervous. Now I actually needed to show up on opening night and deliver night after night. Fortunately, the quality of the club and the popular fad of the music would carry this challenge for me. All I needed to do was have fun and make sure the primarily student crowd enjoyed and danced to the music.

The aptly named Shenanigans had a strictly enforced maximum capacity of 550 people. This new disco club was so popular, it was common on the weekends for a line of anxious dancers to be wrapped completely around the building waiting for the doors to open to insure they got in for the night. I was told the interior designers had worked on Las Vegas clubs, and that the club was designed to resemble the Caesars Palace showroom.

The new owners had totally gutted the bowling alley, but saved the bowling lanes, shaped them into pie sliced angles and put them back in the center of the room to create the very large round dance floor. Motion floor lights were used as dividers between each slice of the previous bowling lanes, now a generous circular dance stage, inviting for all the latest student disco moves. *The Bus Stop, The Bump and the Hustle*, were on display nightly.

The light show above had several wagon wheel spokes with neon lights that would alternate, creating a "Spinning Wheel" effect. There were strobe lights, which I used sparingly on prominent drum beats, as I've always had a touch of vertigo and believed more than a few seconds of strobes quickly became annoying. Although, occasionally a talented solo dancer in a strobe light effect would get a roar from the crowd.

There were rows of colored beam lights, which were synchronized through a revolutionary functional equipment that picked up the beat of the music and signaled the lights to appear to move rhythmically with the disco beat. I remember that the music and light show equipment cost over \$30,000—more than the average home at the time. In today's dollars, that would be over \$200,000 in equipment.

There was a homemade fog machine, which consisted of dropping a large block of dry ice into a heated metal drum, under the DJ booth, with air duct fans blowing the fog over the dance floor. There was always a risk of the ice exploding upwards, before the trap door was shut, and this required it to be a two man job with quick reactions. We were successful getting the door closed, most of the time, so the fog went on the dance floor, where it was intended.

Earth Wind and Fire, Donna Summers, The Bee Gees, Ohio Players, and K.C. and the Sunshine Band, would all come alive nightly, with the light and fog show in a way none of us, young Jayhawks, had ever seen. Then, to change the mood for a slow dance, we would dim the lights and segue to hear Tavares, "*Heaven Must Be Missing an Angel*," as beamed lights targeted the spinning mirror ball, which filled the room with small rectangles of dancing light. It was quite a show, and one I never grew tired of creatively directing. A really exciting dance party atmosphere, and a thrill to be in the middle of the daily student party to "*Shake Your Booty*."

One of our floorwalkers was the official Jayhawk Mascot, and he would occasionally come dressed in costume and dance on the floor to the Jayhawk Fight Song. On game nights and Saturdays, we would open early and students would bring their visiting parents. There were also often Sorority and Fraternity parties. For a change of music pace, we played songs like the Beach Boys "*Dance, Dance, Dance*," or Bachman Turner Overdrive's, "*Taking Care of Business*," or similar popular rock music, which would completely turnover the dance floor. Joe always reminded us, turning the dance floor over to new patrons, would inevitably cause the drink orders increase at the same time.

Another song I enjoyed playing due to the student crowd response was Wild Cherry's "*Play That Funky Music White Boy*." There was usually a dancer on the floor who would lead the entire room to point up at the DJ Booth, and at fellow DJ Bill Pfeifer and me, as they danced. I know Bill would tell you, KU was great, but spending your college years at the Shenanigans nightly dance party, made it even better. Students came regularly, excited to enjoy a break from their studies.

The size of the club required that we appealed to all ethnic and cultural groups around Lawrence, and each had their own music preferences—The young Kansas City, Wichita and Topeka students, and the Western Kansas farm kids. They joined together with the fans of Funk music, the gay Disco fans, and the Haskell Indian College Rock fans. We all came to Shenanigans, and

we all danced together and enjoyed the blend of each culture and music preferences. At times, by design, we might follow a Commodores "*Brick House*" with Bette Midler's "*In The Mood*", or the "*Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*." The contrasting music, for most, added an element of energy and excitement.

Occasionally, some customers would become angry at the changes of music styles and leave after expressing their frustration, but we couldn't afford to cater to just one single music genre. Turning the floor over to new dancers was always delicate, but a balanced playlist needed to be maintained. Most people learned to enjoy the musical variety and the dance floor was seldom empty. If it was, in emergency, we could fade out the song and transition to a sure hit. I might bring them back to the floor with a slow dance like "*How Deep Is Your Love*," and fade that into another Bee Gees hit as they emphatically announced, "*You Should Be Dancing*." What a way to spend our nights through college! I still enjoy playing my favorite disco playlist.

Not only was the job fun, it also paid \$30 a night for 4 hours of work, from 8pm to midnight. For a college kid in the 70s, I felt like I was rich. By college student standards, I was. The cash help limit the times I needed to ask Mom and Dad for money.

If you do the math of 4 hours 6 days a week, I actually spent more hours in college at Shenanigans than in the classroom. I usually had 18 hours of class and 24 hours of Shenanigans Disco. I graduated on time by not skipping class and then I crammed for tests. What an education. Some might say, "Did he major in journalism or disco?" You decide.

Donna Summer's "*Last Dance*" was a favorite nightly last song, along with announcing the "*Last Call for Alcohol*." Kansas was an 18-year-old alcohol state with 3.0 beer at the time. We sold pitchers of that near-beer, but I don't remember, in all those years at Shenanigans, having issues with any disruptions from an over-served patron. We had a wide variety of sodas available too, and they were as popular as the 3.2% low alcohol beer. We were simply college kids having wholesome fun. I introduced Bill to his wife Vicki at Shenanigans, so I know they have fond memories of nights at this premiere Lawrence disco.

At one point, I started to hear rumors on campus that the club was actually owned by K.C. organized crime and that they had built the club with a substantial investment to launder money from their Kansas City operations. I immediately went to the manager and said, "Joe, I'm hearing these rumors on campus." Joe responded, "There is no such thing. You just tell anyone who says it that the stories are made up." I was just a naive young kid and believed whatever I was told. Nothing more was ever said regarding that issue.

For a contrast from disco and school, I also was able to teach Sunday school to middle schoolers during college. I remember after my first week teaching, which I thought went well, I showed up

for my second week, and before the kids came in, a church official came in. He said one of the parents had complained because I had mentioned I was a KU student, and that I also said I worked at Shenanigans. The administrator was going to sit-in on the class and evaluate my lesson. After class, he was very complimentary, but did say to be safe, "Just don't mention anything about working at Shenanigans in class again."

Shenanigans was so successful, the same ownership group opened up a 21-and-over club called Bullwinkle's. They stayed open until 2am, and I didn't enjoy working there near as much, as there were fewer students and more locals, so I stayed with Shenanigans whenever I could. Bullwinkle's, was an older crowd with hard liquor being served. Sorry Bill, but I prefer most often that you work Bullwinkle's. Even though it was 6 hours of work and paid more, I know we both preferred the wholesome Shenanigan's college crowd, and the midnight closing hours.

The lyrics of most disco songs were typically about joy, love and dancing. Earth Wind and Fire's lead singer was Phillip Bailey, who in the 80s embarked on a solo artist Christian Music career. A motivational song he wrote, "*No Compromise*", I still find inspirational for life and career.

*To follow your dream is no easy matter, So many have started, then fell by the way  
If you believe in your heart, And make your mind up  
You can go to the finish, come what may  
So don't give up and never give in, There's so much left to do*

*So go and take the curves, And follow the road signs  
You'll make it through, If there's no compromise in you*

*Give the best of yourself, Never settle for less  
Knowing that it's all that you can do  
Give the best that you have, When you're put to the test  
Cause what you give in the end, Comes back to you*

*So follow your heart, until the Sun shines  
On your dreams and they become real  
You'll make it through, If there's no compromise in you*

Shenanigans was a long time ago in a different era, and the adults behind Shenanigans are long gone and now we are the senior citizens, on Medicare. But when I think about those days, or visit Lawrence, I'm 19 again, and fondly step back to those memories.

Time to put on my favorite disco band, Earth, Wind and Fire. Preferably "*That's the way of the World,*" "*Fantasy*" or "*Boogie Wonderland.*" Then again, anything by the Bee Gees or Donna Summer, works just as well.

