

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 picturesque and the quintessential college community. A great place and time to be with over 20,000 students your age.

Disco, with its elementary and repetitive beat was just becoming popular, for its short-lived existence, which correlated exactly with the same years I was in college. Word had gotten around that some group of investors, wanting to open a student friendly dance club, had bought the bowling ally just off campus and next to late nightly student diet staple, Joe's Donuts. I thought, *"I like music, they will need a DJ, and I like donuts."*

So one day after class, during my freshman year, I went to the former bowling ally, now under construction, and the manager, Joe, was there with the construction crew. I told him I wanted to be the DJ, even though my only experience was a few days of working at the student station KJHK, at the time. I got the job on the spot. Then I got nervous, Now I needed to actually show up opening night and deliver night after night. Fortunately the club quality and the popularity of the music would carry that challenge for me. All I ultimately needed to do was have fun and make sure the primarily student dance crowd liked the music enough to get up and dance to the music. The positive response was immediate and overwhelming.

The aptly named Shenanigans, had a maximum capacity of 550 people. The new owners totally gutted the old bowling ally, but saved the bowling lanes, and shaped them into pie sliced angles, and then put them back in the center of the room, with synchronized lights used as dividers between each slice of dance floor,, of these one time bowling lanes, which now were put together like slices of pie, into a very large circular dance floor. The light show above had several wagon wheel, neon lights, that would light alternately creating a "Spinning Wheel" effect. There were Strobe lights, which I used sparingly, as I've always had a touch of vertigo, and felt extended use of them could be annoying to patrons. However, occasionally, a solo dancer would take to the floor and get a roar from the crowd with a robot dance, to strobe light effect.

High in the ceiling, there were rows of colored beam lights. All the lights were synchronized through a three revolutionary components, at the time, which picked up the beat of the music and caused the lights to seem to dance with the disco beat. I remember the music and light show cost over \$30,000, more than the average home at the time. In today's dollars that would be an expense of over \$200,000 for the music and light show.

Earth Wind and Fire, Donna Summers, The Bee Gees, The Ohio Players and K.C. and the Sunshine Band, would all come alive, with the light show, in a way that none of us young Jayhawks had ever seen. Then to change the mood for a slow dance, the house lights could be dimmed and we would segue to Tavares, *"Heaven Must Be Missing an Angel,"* and we would turn on the beamed lights aimed at the mirror balls, which filled the room with small rectangles of dancing lights. It was a show to see, and an exciting dance atmosphere. I never tired of the thrill to be directing the presentation, in the middle of the celebration.

There was a homemade fog machine, which consisted of dropping a large block of dry ice into a heated drum barrel, under the disc jockey booth, with two air ducts and fans to blow the rolling fog over the dance floor. An impressive effect when it worked as designed. The trick was to get the trap door shut quickly before the chemical reaction exploded up into the booth and

the equipment, making the fog machine procedure a two man job. We were successful most of the time, so the fog would spill over the dance floor as intended.

One of our floorwalkers, was also the official Jayhawk Mascot, and he would occasionally come, “unofficially” dressed in his full Jayhawk costume, and dance on the floor to the “*Jayhawk Fight Song*,” among the dancing lights and fog. That never failed to excite the crowd.

On game days we would open early on Saturday, and students would even bring their visiting parents, who could relive their youth and enjoy Shenanigans with their kids. Well, there were a few parent killjoys, but most did not forget how to be young, and even danced in this college celebratory fun atmosphere. Imagine a room full of sorority girls, with their dads, dancing to the current disco hits. Who wouldn’t think that would be fun? Not me.

For a change of music pace, we might play the Beach Boys, “*Dance, Dance, Dance*,” or the Village People’s “*YMCA*.” This would intentionally, and completely, turnover the dance floor. Joe was always quick to come by and remind us, “That’s what you want, and the best way to give some people a rest, let others take over the dance floor, which always helps the drink orders to increase,” at that time.

Another song I enjoyed playing due, to the dance crowd response, was Wild Cherry’s “*Play That Funky Music White Boy*.” There was almost always a dancer on the floor who would lead the group to turn and point up at the DJ Booth towards fellow DJ, Bill Pfeifer and Me, as they danced and pointed emphatically. I know Bill would tell you as well, “KU was great, but spending your night leading the Shenanigans nightly dance party, made it even better.” Students always came excited to take a break from their studies and collectively dance in the Jayhawk Shenanigans atmosphere.

Nowadays you have to be extra sensitive about how you describe the following factual information, but the reality was, the large size of the club, required appealing to all local races and ethnic groups, each with their own personal music preferences. The young Johnson County students. The Western Kansas farm kids. They came together with the fans of urban Funk music. Haskell Indian College was also nearby, and I learned from them, how much they loved that “*Old Time, Rock and Roll*.”

They all came, and they all danced, and we learned to enjoy naturally, the blend of dance cultures, along with the predominate current disco music. I am glad that we didn’t have Rap music in the 1970s. I wouldn’t play that then or now.

At times by design we might follow a Parliament song with Bette Midlers “*In The Mood*”, or the “*Boogie Boogie Bugle Boy*.” Occasionally, some customers would become angry and leave, upset by the change and eclectic music, not wanting to surrender the dance floor, to watch others for a few minutes. We couldn’t afford to cater to disco only, or any other singular music style. The added benefit of turning the floor over to new dancers was always a challenge. Most people enjoyed the variety, and the dance floor was seldom empty. If it was, we faded out the song and transitioned to a sure hit like the Bee Gees, “*You Should Be Dancing*.” What a way to spend your nights through college.

Not only was the job fun, it paid \$30 a night, for 4 hours work, from 8pm to Midnight. For a college kid in the 70s, that was rich. Midnight was a strict cutoff of music and drink service, So Donna Summer’s “*Last Dance*” was a favorite song to end the night, and let all the undergraduate Cinderella’s know their pumpkin chariot awaited. Kansas was an 18 year old legal alcohol state, with 3.2% beer at the time. We sold pitchers of that near beer. I don’t remember in all those years having issues with any disruptions from students being over

served. We had a wide variety of sodas available too, and they were as popular as the 3.% low alcohol beer.

At one point, I started to hear rumors on campus, that the club was actually owned by Kansas City organized crime, and that they had built the club with substantial investment to launder money from Kansas City. I 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 that, that the stories are made up." I was just a young kid and believed whatever I was told. Nothing more was ever said regarding that issue.

For a contrast, I also was able to teach Sunday school to middle schoolers during college. I remember after my first week which I thought went well, I showed up for my second week, and before the kids came in, a church official came in and 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. They were going to sit through the class and evaluate my lesson, to alleviate the expressed concern. After class, they told me that the lesson was very good and that to be safe, just don't mention anything about working at Shenanigans in Sunday school class, in the future.

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. Sorry Bill, I prefer you work Bullwinkle's tonight. Even though it was 6 hours of work and paid more, but I preferred the Shenanigans crowd and the midnight closing hours.

The lyrics to most disco songs were uplifting and typically about joy, love and dancing. Earth, Wind and Fire's lead singer was Phillip Bailey, who later became a solo Christian Music artist. One of his songs, "*No Compromise*," I still find motivational 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 heart, and make your mind up, You can go to the finish, come what may
So don't give up, and never give in, you'll make it through, if there's no compromise in you.*

*Give the best of yourself, never settle for less, knowing 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 Son shines, on your dreams, and they become real
Go Take the curves & follow the road signs, you'll make it through, if there's no compromise in you*

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

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

