



**ARKANSAS HISTORIC
PRESERVATION PROGRAM**

**Sandwiching in History Tour
Arkansas Municipal Auditorium
216 Walnut St., Texarkana**

November 7, 2025

By Song Johnson

Special thanks to: Velvet Cool, Jamie Finley



*Arkansas Municipal Building
Photo by Ashley Sides, 2025*

Building the Building

The Arkansas Municipal Auditorium was designed by Witt, Siebert & Halse designed many other buildings in Texarkana, such as the post office on State Line Avenue and Texarkana

National Bank.¹ The auditorium is part of a larger complex that includes the fire department, the municipal offices, the jail, and the auditorium. Construction began in 1927, and the auditorium was completed first and opened in 1928. The fire department, jail, and city offices did not open until 1930.² The building features a combination of Collegiate Gothic and Art Deco architectural styles. Collegiate Gothic is derived from the Gothic Revival style, which draws on motifs from Medieval Gothic architecture. This style was more commonly used for high schools and college campuses, so the design being used on a government facility is rather striking. Collegiate Gothic is more common on campuses that were built between the mid-18th century to early 19th century.³ Art Deco was more commonly used in buildings built between the 1920s and 1940s.⁴

Collegiate Gothic and Art Deco both incorporate decorative stone reliefs, which can be seen outside towards the top of the building. Collegiate Gothic architecture can be seen mainly on the exterior of the building with the arched, sunk-in doorframes and windows. The masonry is a mix of both Art Deco and Collegiate Gothic. The Art Deco style is more prevalent inside the auditorium, with its stained-glass windows, roofing tiles, and the two decorative plaster reliefs. The exterior of the building has not changed as much, but the interior has, as we can see, the concrete floor beneath me. Offices have been added below me for the fire department and city offices. This change happened sometime in the 1970s, but an exact date is unknown. A fascinating fact is the blueprints show an organ was designed to be placed on stage right behind the wall. Whether an organ was put in or not, I do not know. It explains why this plaster relief is open while the one to the stage left is closed. The left one was meant to hold a fan behind it for cooling. Another exciting aspect is that the tiles above us are meant to help with sound within the building and are believed to be original. The company that created the tiles is still in business today!

History

The 1950s were the busiest time for the auditorium that held big-name shows ranging from Elvis Presley to Johnny Cash. The building hosted out-of-town artists in the 1940s. For example, in 1942, Louis Armstrong performed.⁵ The mid-1950s is when the auditorium hosted more entertainers than at any other time.

Many of you may know that Elvis performed here, and I would like to highlight how this auditorium not only hosted great performers but also provided a venue for a wide range of

¹ Victoria G. Clow, "Texarkana U.S. Post Office and Courthouse," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2000), Section 8, 15.

² Ralph S. Wilcox, "Texarkana, Arkansas, Municipal Building," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 2004), Section 8, 1.

³ "Characteristics of the Collegiate Gothic Style," Loyola University of Maryland, accessed October 25, 2025, [Characteristics of the Collegiate Gothic Style | Department of History | Loyola University Maryland](#).

⁴ Virginia S. McAlester, *A Field Guide to American Houses* (Knopf, 2020), 581.

⁵ City of Texarkana, "Louis Armstrong," Arkansas Municipal Auditorium Museum, accessed September 23, 1950.

events. For example, in 1936, the auditorium was part of the Louisiana State University's Orchestra tour.⁶ The tour was advertised to be covering Northwest Louisiana but included Texarkana. In 1947, "the Bowie and Miller County chapters of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis" helped to present the opera *Madame Butterfly*.⁷ This opera is not easy to put on, and the short summary from The English National Opera touches on the complicated plot well:

Set in the early 20th century, *Madam Butterfly* explores themes of love, heartbreak, betrayal and cultural differences. This enduring tale encapsulates a tragic love story between a young Japanese girl called Cio Cio San and an American naval officer, Pinkerton. After marrying each other, San is soon abandoned by Pinkerton, but stays hopeful waiting for his return. However, she is eventually reunited with Pinkerton... and his American wife. Cio Cio goes on to make a devastating decision, which inevitably leads to her own fall.⁸

Along with traveling performances, many conferences were also held at the auditorium. An interesting example is in 1951, the National Baptist Southwest Regional Convention held its preopening musical in this auditorium.⁹ The rest of the conference was held at the local Baptist Church, but it is notable that the "preopening musical" occurred at Arkansas Municipal Auditorium. The performance was said to have a 150-person choir.¹⁰

Many entertainers, such as Elvis Presley, performed in Texarkana during the early stages of their careers and many of which were traveling between Nashville, Tennessee, to Shreveport, Louisiana. The Louisiana Hayride was a radio station held at the Shreveport Municipal Auditorium, providing musicians with the opportunity to simultaneously perform on stage and be broadcast live on the radio. The radio helped to launch their careers since the station could be heard across many states and gave a platform to lesser-known artists trying to build their careers.¹¹ The shows had a variety of acts, which helped singers like Johnny Cash become the legends they are today. The Hayride is important to the history of the Arkansas Municipal Auditorium since many of the singers who performed there were only traveling through the state because of the route.

Elvis's performance dates are a great way to see the route taken to the Louisiana Hayride. Elvis normally performed on Friday nights at the Arkansas Municipal Auditorium and either Saturday or Sunday performed on the Louisiana Hayride. For example, he performed on

⁶ "University Orchestra Gives Seven Concerts in Northwest La. Tour," *Advocate (Baton Rouge)*, March 22, 1936, 9.

⁷ "Madam Butterfly to be Presented at Texarkana," *McCurtain Gazette*, December 3, 1947, 1.

⁸ "Discover Madame Butterfly," English National Opera, accessed September 12, 2025, [What is the Story of Madame Butterfly? Plot & More | ENO](#).

⁹ "National Southwest Regional Convention," *The Call*, April 20, 1951, 21.

¹⁰ "National Southwest Regional Convention."

¹¹ Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation, "Shreveport Municipal Memorial Auditorium," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1991), 8.

Friday, December 3rd, 1954, and the next day he was performing live on the Hayride.¹² Another example of this is on Friday, November 17th, 1955, Elvis performed a 7 pm show in Texarkana, and that Saturday, he was performing live on the Hayride.¹³ My main issue with Elvis's performances was I could only find three well documented performances and three more that the community agrees on occurring. There is a high likelihood Elvis performed in Texarkana more than six times, but I struggled to find more due to my limited access to Texarkana's newspapers and overall limited digital documentation around Elvis's older performances.

Artists like Carl Perkins sometimes performed unreleased songs on their tours, and Texarkana residents claim "Blue Suede Shoes" was first performed here on November 17, 1955.¹⁴ There is conflicting information on this night. Some claim Elvis was supposed to perform with Carl Perkins, but he was unable, so Johnny Cash filled in for Carl Perkins.¹⁵ Newspapers advertise the event as Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Hank Thompson, and Charline Arthur as the only performers.¹⁶ If Carl Perkins had performed, it may have run under the radar since he would later blow up after the release of "Blue Suede Shoes."

One interesting thing about Elvis is the number of impersonators he has, and this phenomenon started early on in his career. Cheesie Nelson is believed to be the first Elvis impersonator when Elvis was running late on December 3rd, 1954.¹⁷ Another night the locals know well is September 2nd, 1955. This is the second time Elvis was late to his scheduled performance at 9 o'clock. Scottie, a member of his band, had wrecked Elvis's Cadillac near Fouke.¹⁸ Cheesie was asked to come on stage since Elvis had not appeared. This is said to have kick-started Chessie Nelson's career as an Elvis impersonator. Cheesie was always ready to step in to help the show go on!

This auditorium held Texarkana's first interracial audience and performance on August 27th, 1956. This happened during the *Evolution of Jazz*, which was a multi-day event. The *Texarkana Gazette* stated that "a cast of 50 has been rehearsing for two weeks on the show, which portrays the history of jazz from primitive Africa to modern day."¹⁹ The show allowed local musicians to show off their musical talents and highlight how jazz has impacted this region. One of the segments played Scott Joplin's work since ragtime became a foundation to jazz as we know it today. Scott Joplin is said to be the father of ragtime, and he was raised in Texarkana. He might not have been alive to play in this theater, but his music would.

Lois Towles Caesar, who was one of the notable pianists who is said to have performed in *The Evolution of Jazz*. The *Arkansas State Press* said she "became a worldwide figure and is

¹² Lee Cotton, *Did Elvis Sing in Your Hometown* (High Sierra Books, 1995), 30-31.

¹³ Cotton, *Did Elvis Sing in your Hometown*, 119.

¹⁴ City of Texarkana, "History Made at Texarkana Arkansas Municipal Auditorium," Arkansas Municipal Auditorium Museum, Accessed September 23, 2025.

¹⁵ Cotton, *Did Elvis Sing in Your Hometown*, 119.

¹⁶ "In Person Elvis Presley, Hank Thompson," *Texarkana Daily News*, 1955. [Elvis Presley In Concert](#).

¹⁷ Stanley Oberst, *Elvis in Texas: The Undiscovered King, 1954-1958* (Republic of Texas Press, 2002), 19.

¹⁸ "Fouke Man Hurt in Collision of Car, Truck," *Texarkana Daily News*, September 3, 1955. [Elvis Presley In Concert](#).

¹⁹ "Will be Played at Jazz-1956: Texarkana Wrote First Piece of Jazz," *Texarkana Gazette*, August 26, 1956.

now regarded as one of the outstanding pianists of our time."²⁰ Towles grew up in Texarkana and became well known for her piano skills and as an educator. She was the first African American student to hold a Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of Iowa. Additionally, she was the second student to receive the degree.²¹

Modern Day

The theater in the 1970s was renovated to create storage and offices below us. This has significantly changed the shape of this auditorium but has not destroyed its spirit. As someone who has worked on the technical side of theater, I do love this stage since the proscenium and fly loft have been preserved. A proscenium is the section of the theater in front of the curtains. That would be the walls and the arch above me. The fly loft is where curtains go when they are not needed on the stage. This is why theaters will have higher roof lines to give space for any curtain or stage wall to be raised.

The auditorium has gone through phases of renovation to preserve it. For example, in 2008, AHPP gave a \$44,000 grant to the auditorium to restore the roof.²² This was overseen by the Arkansas Municipal Auditorium Commission (AMAC). Other projects the AMAC worked on were replacing the north-facing doors and windows. Though the commission has dissolved, the work is still ongoing through people such as Ms. Velvet Cool. The three main concerns going forward are fire safety, air conditioning, and handicap accessibility. Fire safety is the largest concern because until guidelines are met, the number of visitors is greatly limited. Air conditioning would allow for summer events since we all know it gets way too hot. Lastly, with handicap accessibility, this is limited due to the structure of the building. The building's design gives little room for ramps or elevators, so determining how to implement these goals will prove difficult. Any exterior remodeling that creates too much change could cause the auditorium to be removed from the National Register. Additionally, with the fire department and municipal offices using the space, this does not allow for hallways to be easily remodeled.

²⁰ "Texarkana Welcomes Negro Daughter Who Made Good in the Concert World," *Arkansas State Press*, November 17, 1950.

²¹ Lauri Harding, "Lois Towles Caesar," in *Notable Black American Women: Book III*, ed. Jessie C. Smith and Shirelle Phelps (Gale Group, 2003), 82.

²² "Auditorium Project gets \$44,000 Grant," *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, June 21, 2008, 18.

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The Arkansas Historic Preservation Program is the agency of Arkansas Heritage responsible for the identification, evaluation, registration and preservation of the state's cultural resources. Arkansas Heritage is a division of the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage, and Tourism.



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