The House of Rock Community

By Amanda Kowalski

**Sound clip**

**Amanda Kowalski:** Hello, and Welcome to South Texas Stories, my name is Amanda Kowalski, we will be looking at the evolution of House of Rock and its connection to the community around it.

**Sound clip**

**Amanda Kowalski:** Do you remember when music first touched your life? I do, it was my parents playing records. We had a great big, fake wood stereo system in our living room. It was huge, with towering speakers. The sounds of the record player coming to life has always been important to me, and to this day I prefer listening to vinyl records. Those familiar pops and crackles are as much a part of me as the color of my eyes, which is grey if you were wondering. As a family we saw live music, it was a common part of our life. Growing up in Corpus Christi, a small city in South Texas on the Gulf of Mexico allowed for a mixture of cultures to influence my tastes.[[1]](#footnote-1) The city hummed with many different rhythms, country, rock, jazz, Tejano, so many styles of music. My parents enjoyed country music and rock music from the 1950s and 1960s. Outside influences on my musical taste came from my neighbors who showed me Tejano and Rap as a child. I never needed to rebel to listen to music. I was never censored, never told that music could turn me into a bad person or lead me down a wrong path. My mom helped me save up money to buy my very first cassette tape when I was eight years old, it was Appetite for Destruction by Guns and Roses. These memories are something everyone can relate to. Music shapes each and every one of us. The biggest musical experience in most people’s life is the first concert. Do you remember your first concert? This is where it gets tricky for me, I grew up with live music, whether it was concerts my parents took me to or my best friend’s father who played in a Tejano band, live music was always part of my life. But the first show I went to without my parents, that I do remember… it was Ronnie James Dio. That changed who I was. I was fourteen. This was exciting, I could be free and on my own. I was also scared. But then something clicked. I was with people who liked what I liked, I looked around and they dressed like me. This was not family or classmates, but it was my community. I felt like I belonged. This experience is vital for an individual and a community. The connection formed by live music performance also allows for venues to be a place of local community and culture.[[2]](#footnote-2) These experiences are not lost to a previous era; these memories are still being made, in so many places. They build the culture and identity of the city while supporting the economics.[[3]](#footnote-3) I wanted to look closer at a place memories like this are made, so I spoke with Casey Lain, the owner and operator of House of Rock to understand how a music venue fits within the community around it.

**Sound Clip**

**Amanda Kowalski:** House of Rock is situated in downtown Corpus Christi, an area that has seen both boom and bust. Urban decay has crept through the area for decades but recently it has been in an upswing. House of Rock opened in 2005, when most of the bars and restaurants were confined to one strip between Water Street and Chaparral Street. The bar is located at 511 Starr St which is off that strip by a block or two. Everything inside was black, the walls were pretty much bare, and I would not say it was particularly inviting. The darkly painted bar was a shell of what it would become. In the early days it specialized in more hardcore shows, but that model could not last as Corpus Christi has proven, it is a town that centers on being adaptable and allowing multiple cultures to mingle. Casey Lain had worked at other music venues in Corpus Christi, like the Executive Surf Club and Concrete Street Amphitheater. He had the experience to make a music venue work. House of Rock was different. The trial and error process began as a way to make the venue more profitable but also it needed to connect to the community it served. Casey describes some of the challenges he faced:

**Casey Lain:** Yeah, you know, I was humbled when it first opened because I had a plan, you know, and I what I was used to at this size of the venue was a Surf Club closed at 11:00 during the week, midnight on Friday and Saturday door started it open at 7:00. The opener went on an eight and a nine o'clock the headliner went on and that formula just work. You know, so I thought we'd have earlier shows. I thought we would have a wider variety of shows and more songwriters and things that were umm-- not that we did at the Surf Club because I was actually trying to steer clear a little bit of a lot of that stuff just out of respect and-- you know, friendliness of being at a neighbor. You know, but there was a lot of things that weren't getting booked at that time at the Surf Club. So-- I made a run at some songwriter shows and different things and you know, I just couldn't come to work here. You know an early crowd; it didn't have an early crowd here. The crowd here got here at 9 o'clock 10 o'clock at night - so shows are going till 2:00 a.m. You know, which is just super late, you know to be on your wits, you know until that time. So, you know, I learned to kind of go with the crowd and we had a harder crowd of people wanted to hear heavier music and there's a void for that. There was never a venue this size that was doing punk and rock and hardcore shows and so we were very heavy in those genres.

**Amanda Kowalski:** Music tastes in Corpus Christi have always crossed boundaries. House of Rock needed to evolve and match the community around it. The dark walls and hardcore atmosphere needed to change to reflect this multi-genre approach.

**Casey Lain:** You know, it wasn't until probably year three to where we had remodeled the venue a little bit softened it up painting the walls it became less black, less of a rock bar, and more of a venue to where some of those songwriter show started to pay off and some of the reggae show started coming through. We were able to kind of open up our horizons a little bit musically, but that was something that I thought out of the get gate-- out of the get-go, we needed to be-- was you know, play good music whatever that is, whatever genre that is. You know, good music and get touring bands, and we did that, but we were stuck in one genre of just heavy and hard music. Which was fun, you know, but it was also-- umm there's only so many fans in this town that can support that kind of music and you can't do that seven days a week and have that same fanbase come in seven days a week. So, we had to broaden our horizons and kind of really shoot for different genres and different types of events. And burlesque shows and things that are just kind of outside the box a little bit, you know, so yeah that definitely took a mind of its own at some point.

**Amanda Kowalski:** The unique décor in House of Rock is part of the venue’s character. Every piece of art is part of the community that inhabits the space. Photographs, paintings, sculptures, music instruments line the walls. Casey talks about the unique light fixtures, a detail that many would overlook as part of a community’s culture.

**Casey Lain:** Yeah. I know, its— lighting is crazy. We just lit up the outside and the sidewalks and it's only been up for about a month the other day I turned it off just to kind of see what it looked like because I had forgotten, and it was so sketchy I do not know how been a business so long without lighting on the sidewalk. Bryan Tierce was an old friend of mine, he worked for a beer company when I was at Executive Surf Club. And when I— we open House of Rock, we are sitting here one night and I did not have a budget, did not have any money to spend but I need a new lighting fixtures. And so, we were trying to figure out how could we turn a guitar into lights. So we came up with this kind of mental concept of how it would work and I ended up I think on MySpace telling people, "Hey, if you bring an instrument to House of Rock you get into the show without paying a cover" and we picked a show and we got a few guitars show up and some drums, some snare drums. And Brian took like a prototype to guitar, uhh it was actually a bass guitar I had and turn that into our first guitar light— was like a prototype. And then from there we built something five or six more of those things and kind of put them around and from that idea sparked the we have the old kind of warehouse lights like china cap lights and replace those with snare drums and just put a gel from a stage light on the bottom of it to make our in our drum lights which are cool. Fast forward a few years and those lights on the outside of the building we just put up are LED lights and on they are weatherproof, but our electrician wanted to go one extra level and he wanted to protect it from the Sun and he was going to fabricate these round discs to put on the backside of them just to keep them in the shade. And so how big of a disk you talking about— and he was all pretty much exactly like this pizza pan. So now if you go outside, we've incorporated thirteen pizza pans into our thirteen lighting fixtures, and so the theme of creating lights out of instruments and food items and whatnot or kitchen utensils are still ongoing.

**Amanda Kowalski:** House of Rock connected to the community, it grew and flourished because of this connection. From the very beginning, it was not simply a bar but a place that individuals could gather and feel a part of something, Casey tells us about the culture of the venue and how the regulars help establish the venue’s identity in the early years.

**Casey Lain:** Man. I you know what? It's regulars, they came in. So, there were there was an existing fan base of House of Rock. When I partnered-- I partnered about a month and a half after the effort opened. So, there was already a fan base. There wasn't a ton of people but there's a handful of regulars that came from day one. And uhh-- we ended up, you know, put some beer specials on kind of in their favorite things that they liked and that kind of grew. And I would say that most of those people still come around but most of them have kids now and are in relationships and have moved on and grew up a little bit, but they still come around and still give us support. But we were very fortunate that we had a group of-- really those musicians in this town. Musicians and artists, you know that kind of help support us to the early years.

**Amanda Kowalski**: One of the first times I went to House of Rock in 2005 I met one of the regulars, Arnulfo, he never made me feel out of place. He welcomed me, and quickly became my friend. We had very little in common, but we sat next to each other at the bar. As the years have passed, much has changed but the people who frequent the bar still invite you in and showcase why spaces like this are important to the community.

**Casey Lain:** I would not be doing House of Rock justice if I did not mention Arnulfo, the singer to Drastic Actions. I met an Arnulfo years ago at another bar. We hit it off and became friendly with each other at that point used to see him at shows back in the day. But he stood out as a character you walked in the door and you would notice Arnulfo, it is probably one of the sweetest guys that come— that I know but he is kind of— also the same time a crusty punk rocker, which gives him his character. But he, we started serving two-dollar Lone Star. We had a guy named Chris Hastings who did some work for us and ran some cables and went to settle up with him and he said all I ask is you serve Lone Star, so he did me a solid favor. So, I put a permanent two dollar Lone Star on special, thinking nobody's going to drink Lone Star except Chris Hastings — well turns out Arnulfo also liked Lone Star it turns out every punk rocker this town I think wanted to be like Arnulfo, sit at House of Rock and drink two dollar Lone Star. So, at one point we became the largest Lone Star retailer in the state of Texas, which was cool because I think the only sell it in Texas which means we were number one in the world, so we used to claim on to that or claim that— that fame.

**Amanda Kowalski**: House of Rock works because of the community around it. Other geographic locations would not fit the venue, or the venue would not be the same. It is the connection between the community and the venue that makes it special.

**Casey Lain**: I feel like if we were to take House of Rock and plant it in Houston, Austin, Dallas, San Antonio, you know, any other major market we would be one of many. You know in Corpus; we have the luxury of being the rock and roll bar here in town and ‘THE’ House of Rock and the place where we can do things like we do and there's not a lot of other people doing it at this point. At least not at this level and this size room and so even though there is other music venues in this town and there is other event space venues in this town. We're all able to kind of coexist do things our own way.

**Amanda Kowalski:** It is the sense of belong that makes House of Rock. The moment I walked into the bar, I felt at ease. I was there in the early months of 2005, it was dark, it was a bit sketchy but the people in the bar made me feel like I belonged, just as the people who attended the Ronnie James Dio concert. House of Rock also connects to the city, it has become one of the staples of the community. Casey talks about this connection:

**Casey Lain** We wanted to be a place that grew little by little by little and had a massive foundation and could get by on very little so that we can kind of weather the storms anything that comes our way. And you know being like CBGB type place to where they did not open up and tending to be what they became they became that way because that's the direction that the fanbase took them and our clientele and the music that and that era. But from a bar standpoint business standpoint, we always talked about as places out there like Vernon's, and the Texan, and Lou’s Saloon and these landmark places in Corpus that you know aren't that place like the new place that has all the fame and glory for a year or two and it goes away. We wanted to build slowly and build that fan base and really tie into the community and become part of fabric, you know of downtown Corpus.

**Amanda Kowalski:** Memories make a community; it is where that sense of belonging anchors. Just as my first concert experience shaped my identity, House of Rock hopes to do that for many others.

**Amanda Kowalski**: House of Rock is used for many events beyond music. Art shows, burlesque, comedy and so much more. It is a place to belong, it is where many see their first concert, where many see how they connect to the community around them. I have been to hundreds of venues, throughout the entire country but there is only one venue that makes me feel at home, as soon as I walk in, I feel at ease, I hope others find this sense of belonging like I have in House of Rock. But more importantly, do you remember your first concert? That feeling of nostalgia should linger, it should give you a moment where you feel free and like you are a part of something. These events help form our identity as an individual and as a community. Places like House of Rock give the community a place to gather and become connected. Corpus Christi’s history may be mark with many places like House of Rock, but that does not make this one any less important. History is made where the community is gathered, not just in classrooms or forgotten museums, it is in places like House of Rock. This has been South Texas Stories and I am Amanda Kowalski.

**Exit music.**

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1. Murphy Givens & Jim Moloney, *Corpus Christi: A History* (Corpus Christi, TX: Nueces Press, 2011), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Catherine Strong and Samuel Whiting, “‘We Love the Bands and We Want to Keep Them on the Walls’: Gig Posters as Heritage-as-Praxis in Music Venues” *Continuum* 32, no. 2 (2018): 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock'n'Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)