

HoustonPress

# The Coolest Thing to Hit Downtown Houston in Ages (R.I.P. Michael Condray)

BY CHRIS GRAY

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 23, 2016 AT 7 A.M.



Photo by Chris Gray

Next month's March Madness Music Festival may be a bunch of dog shit, but at least now all those out-of-towners will have something pretty cool to look at on their way to Discovery Green. Above is a mural by the artist Jamal Cyrus titled *Lightnin' Field*. Part of the city's ongoing efforts to spruce up downtown before next year's Super Bowl by adding various bits of public art, this one pays tribute to one of Houston's true musical icons, Lightnin' Hopkins. As noted by Swamplot Monday, in real life the mural is on the side of the downtown building now home to the Just a Dollar & Budget Food Store off Main Street Square.

# I N M A N G A L L E R Y

Hard to imagine, but a little more than 40 years ago, you could have walked a few blocks from the mural and seen Hopkins in concert for less than five bucks, which was still more than it would have cost a year earlier to see Bruce Springsteen's Houston debut at the same place, Liberty Hall. That's because indirectly, Cyrus's mural is also a tribute to the local club that, besides Hopkins and Springsteen, hosted everyone from Clifton Chenier and Muddy Waters to the Velvet Underground and Ramones in its seven-year lifespan. One famous night, Neil Young, Linda Ronstadt, Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris all shared the stage together; another, ZZ Top played one of its very first gigs opening for Chicago blues legend Willie Dixon.

One of the men who opened Liberty Hall in 1971, Michael Condray, passed away over the weekend at age 71. Condray also helped run other historic local venues, including Jubilee Hall and the Family Hand restaurant, but Liberty Hall is the place Springsteen — who sold out seven shows across four nights in his 1974 Texas debut, Condray recalled in a 2009 *Houston Press* article — worked into a line in his song "This Hard Land," which was eventually released on his 1998 odds-and-ends box set *Tracks*.

Springsteen's song may have put Liberty Hall on the map, but it has always had a place in the imaginations of Houston's music lovers, even some far too young to have actually gone there. "Michael Condray is one of those players who was never out in the spotlight, but without whom the scene would have been far less interesting than it was," the *Press*'s William Michael Smith wrote in April 2014, after Condray had been hospitalized because of complications of both brain and lung cancer.

His friends agreed, right up to the end.

"It was a terrific venue and it ran a lot of wonderful acts across its stage," John Wilson wrote on Condray's Life Tributes page Monday. "I was lucky to be there for many of them. He was a kind man with an eye for great music, and he helped make the world a better place."

<http://www.houstonpress.com/music/the-coolest-thing-to-hit-downtown-houston-in-ages-rip-michael-condray-8265478>