

Top Hat Ballroom: 88 – 94 Dickens Street, Napier.



Entertainment has been provided on this site since at least 13 May 1887 when the then proprietors, Cohen and Conroy offered the Theatre, stage hands and ticket takers, free of charge to any amateur company for a benefit entertainment for the sufferers of the late shipping disaster. This would have been the SS *Belmont* a small coastal steamer, of around 90 tons struck Peggy's Rock near the harbour entrance on 21 February 1887, with six of the eight crew drowned. In 1896 when it was home to the Thompson-Payne skating rink, it was rebuilt as the Gaiety Theatre, a purpose-built cinema that showed silent movies accompanied by an orchestra. It was also used for live performances. The 3 May 1902 issue of the Herald referred to the Pollard's Opera Company performing 'The Rose of Persia'.

This first building, a huge iron structure combining Thompson and Payne's pictures and Hawkins and Rome's motor garage was destroyed by fire on 6 June 1911. The cause was the explosion of an engine in the garage. The insurance on the theatre was 1500 pounds; however, the owners estimated their loss at over 2000 pounds as the films destroyed were valued at 800 pounds.

It was rebuilt in 1912 as the Gaiety Electric Theatre, a popular venue for both movie screening - eventually talkies and live performances. The Western Electric Company installed equipment for talking motion pictures in August 1929. It also hosted many balls and other community events.

Though its façade sustained some damage, the building including a grand concrete staircase survived the 1931 earthquake relatively intact. Although, movies were then screened at McLean Park.



Being one of the first reconditioned buildings after the earthquake the renamed Gaiety de Luxe Theatre with a new façade was completed and reopened on 27 June 1931 with "The

Rogue Song” filmed entirely in technicolour, with romance, singing, music, and action, featuring Lawrence Tibbett. Supporting this picture was a grand array of all-talking featurettes, including the latest Laurel-Hardy comedy. The new façade, with a very big percentage of heavy steel bars was designed in the Spanish Mission style by Finch and Westerholm who also did the State Theatre and the Holder Bros, Builders being the successful tenderers. The auditorium was hung with tapestries depicting Eastern bazaar scenes.

In 1932, the owners Thompson-Payne, mindful of the safety and welfare of their patrons, immediately complied with the new regulations and employed W M Angus to carry out strengthening work. This comprised of a number of steel and concrete buttresses with heavy steel and concrete feet three feet square, running five feet underneath the building and foundations and also five feet into the side alleyways. These buttresses are heavily bolted into the building walls and coupled together with two steel concrete bands which run the whole length and back of the building.



On 27 August 1932 the Daily Telegraph advertised the upcoming Shopping Week including Tyre Races for Boys and girls to start at 3pm from the Gaiety theatre.

Finally operated by Kerridge-Odeon chain the Gaiety de Luxe Cinema closed in 1960

The same year, Napier’s Deputy Mayor, Wally Atherfold, purchased the building and suggested to Bernie Meredith that he should have his own dance hall.



At that time Bernie Meredith aged 33, was a member of the Napier Development Association. During the 1950s he ran weekly dances around the Hawke’s Bay region, devoting his time and energy to many clubs and organisations. Bernie would compere these evenings and put on a floorshow. Live bands would perform for the hundreds who attended. Bernie said “I was basically the ringmaster of a travelling circus, with entertainment being the main act,”



A board was established consisting of a few prominent Napier business people and Bernie was named Chairman. The Top Hat was born, and Bernie was the face of the new venue: “It was my way, or the highway,” he said.



Work began immediately to transform the old cinema area. A raised, waxed 2700 square foot dance floor, surrounded on three sides with 2000 square foot of tables and chairs. The coffee bar was also on a 1500 square foot raised floor. Also including an air conditioning unit capable of completely changing the air every 15 minutes. On opening night of 16 October 1961, a full house with about 800 patrons, singing and dancing to the Ernie Rouse Trad Band. The Top Hat prided itself on providing the best entertainment and Bernie wasted no time appointing Ernie Rouse together with another local band, Johnny and the Contacts, as his resident bands. They alternated with each other for the next five years. Within three weeks of opening, the venue had become an established hit, and by 8.15pm on a Saturday night, the “full house” sign was usually up. In 1966, Lorraine Dudley from Napier, was presented with a gift for being the one-millionth patron through the doors.

Admission price was five shillings including coffee, and no pass-outs were issued. Tickets at the door were purchased from a lady sitting inside a seven-foot circular Top Hat at the bottom of the stairway. There was no liquor sold, and no liquor licence required, just coffee available.

There was a strict dress code to be adhered to: all men must wear tie and jacket. Later in the evenings, on especially hot nights, Bernie would sometimes relax the rules a little and announce, “All men can now remove their ties!”



Every fashion and trend of the 60s was apparent at the Top Hat, from cigarette vending machines, Coca-Cola dispensers, to Brylcreem, winkle pickers, mini skirts, and eventually –as the decade closed out – high collars, long hair, sideboards and psychedelia.



About twenty-six balls a year booked in advance for three years solid at one stage – organising balls was Bernie’s forte – Law Society Balls, Racing Clubs, Sports Clubs. On these occasions he would include alcohol and a light meal in the ticket price at no extra charge.

Bernie saw the need to expand the Top Hat and set about creating a second dance floor called the Black Orchid Room in an unused downstairs section of the building. This, in hindsight wasn’t such a great idea, as people soon worked out that they could arrive later in the evening and still get in.

During 1968, with a slight patronage decline, Bernie closed the venue for a couple of weeks, and transformed the ballroom into MV



(Musical Vessel) Top Hat. The room was painted out with scenes depicting a nautical theme, with portholes and marine life.



Ballroom dance classes were held, Twist dancing competitions, and Limbo nights. A new house band, The Matloes, were a hit at this time.



As the 1960s drew to a close, hotels had extended their drinking hours and were introducing their own entertainment. The numbers were dropping. The writing was on the wall and by then, Bernie had had enough and went on to business brokering and real estate. He also became Chairman of the Hawke's Bay Rugby Supporters Club and helped create Hawkeye, the famous Hawke's Bay team mascot, which he looked after for 17 years.

Various other nightclubs succeeded in the Top Hat building under various name changes. Including promoter Phil Warren's Silver Spade and later, Bananas nightclub.



Bernie Meredith passed away on 20 March 2020, aged 92

In 2014 the building had a Class 1 protection order listed against it. In October 2023 it had a valuation of \$1.26m but was sold on 7 March this year for \$650,000.