



Andrew Collins
The Collins Bar

Date: December 21, 2021

Location: Birmingham, AL

Interviewer: Michelle Little

Transcription: Sharp Copy Transcript

Length: Forty-two minutes

Project: Birmingham Central Business District 2022

0:00:00

Michelle Little: All right. So today is Tuesday, December 21st, 2021, and this is Michelle Little interviewing Andrew Collins for the Southern Foodways Alliance project on the Central Business District.

Andrew Collins: Here we go.

Michelle Little: Now, normally I would open these interviews with all kinds of background questions on you and your family history, but Eric Velasco and you recorded an amazing interview--

Andrew Collins: Oh, yes. Well, good.

Michelle Little: -- back in February of 2017.

Andrew Collins: Wow.

Michelle Little: So I'm gonna put that on the record that if anyone is reading this, they should go back to the February 2017 interview. [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: Okay. There you go. There you are.

Michelle Little: And it is all about your father and your family history. It's a wonderful interview. So I'd like to jump into the Lyric--

Andrew Collins: Right.

Michelle Little: -- and the hot dog restaurant. To me that's just such a special part of Birmingham history.

0:01:00

Andrew Collins: Right.

Michelle Little: Could you tell me just anything your-- I know you were young when your father started it.

Andrew Collins: Oh, yeah. He started it in '58. I started workin' there when I was thirteen, probably early [19]60s.

Michelle Little: Okay. And what do you remember about him picking that location or just kind of the startup of that business?

Andrew Collins: Yeah. Well, he had a restaurant down on 17th Street and 3rd, so he brought his nephew over from Greece and put him in the hot dog business, but that didn't work out, so he took it over from the nephew. And then, I was in the Navy. When I got out of the Navy in [19]71, that's when I took it over.

Michelle Little: Okay. And can you kind of just give me a feel of what your day, your routine was like in the early [19]70s when you were working there every day? Just kind of tell me what a typical day was like for you?

Andrew Collins: Well, we were openin' at six o'clock for breakfast and closing about seven, 'cause downtown was boomin' back then.

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You know, people all over the place. And he eventually started comin' in and openin' up for me, so I came in around nine and worked to close. And it was just a fun job 'cause you met people every day. Then we had our regulars that came in every day.

Michelle Little: Who were some of the people that you remember that would come in, particularly for breakfast?

Andrew Collins: A lot of the ladies that worked in the houses in Mountain Brook would come in, 'cause they had the early mornin' bus they had to catch to get over there. And they were comin' in till the day we closed.

Michelle Little: Ohh.

Andrew Collins: And they were so nice and sweet. They loved us so we missed them a lot. I still run into some of 'em, like, at Publix downtown and stuff, so I'll see 'em around.

Michelle Little: Was there a bus stop on 3rd?

Andrew Collins: It was right across the street. It was on 3rd between 18th and 19th.

0:03:00

Michelle Little: Okay. And then, at lunch, who all would you see at lunch?

Andrew Collins: A lot of Alabama Power people. The president of Alabama Power used to come in back then, and a lot of the people that worked at Loveman's, Pizitz, all those downtown department stores would come in. And then, people in the afternoon-- the ladies would be comin'

back home. They'd stop in on their way home. So there was plenty of people to choose from down here at that time.

Michelle Little: Yeah. And can you just tell me about that street, 3rd Avenue, who were some of the neighboring businesses at that time?

Andrew Collins: There was a pawn shop right next door to me. There was a clothing store called Shop of What's Happening Now. He now owns Jeans Glory down on 3rd Avenue by California Fashion Mall. Then there was Lawrence [sp] Furniture, there was Havertys Furniture was next door to me. There was a hat shop next door to me.

0:04:02

There was a hat shop across the street. Goldstein's furs was directly across the street from us. And, of course, we had Loveman's, Pizitz, Blach's at that time.

Michelle Little: And do you remember some of those shop owners? Who were some of the . . . ?

Andrew Collins: Yeah. Jerry Seligman [sp] owned the pawn shop. J.D. Martin owns Jeans Glory and opened The Shop of What's Happening Now. And the rest 'em I don't-- there was a Weil department store. It was called Vaughan-Weil.

Michelle Little: W-e-i-l? Is that . . . ?

Andrew Collins: Yes. Yes.

Michelle Little: Okay. Wow. And then, tell me about when the Lyric Theatre closed.

Andrew Collins: I guess that's when I was a little kid.

Michelle Little: Right, right.

Andrew Collins: We used to go there to see B movies like Rodan and Godzilla and stuff like that.

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They didn't have the good movies.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: And when they closed, at one time it reopened as a oldies theater. It was a porn theater at one time, and that was years ago. That was probably in the early [19]70s was when it closed, and it's been closed ever since till they redid it.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So did you think or did your dad think when the theater was going through all those changes, did you feel like that would have any effect on your business or . . . ?

Andrew Collins: No. 'Cause most of the theater stuff they did at night, so we were already closed by the time they were doing the movies and stuff.

Michelle Little: Okay. Okay. And then, do you remember when they filmed *Stay Hungry*?

Andrew Collins: Yes.

Michelle Little: Can you tell me about that? [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: Yeah. Well, we were open that day and they had the street blocked. I never saw Arnold Schwarzenegger or anybody, but all these bodybuilders would come in, "Give me a hamburger, nothing on it, just meat. Give me three of 'em."

0:06:00

And they would eat their burgers just with no bread, no nothin' on it 'cause they were pumpin' up. [Laughter] Then they stood out front, they were blowing up hot water bottles till they exploded, all these bodybuilders. And then they did the thing on the balcony where they all stood around. We used to see 'em filming stuff, but we weren't real close to it.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Andrew Collins: Just that one day they were there all day, and they were comin' in all day in their little tighties and muscles hanging out.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: I wasn't gonna tell 'em they couldn't come in without a shirt. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Wait, why were they blowing up hot water bottles?

Andrew Collins: I guess to show that they were he-men and that they were strong. I think it was just a thing with them.

Michelle Little: Hmm.

Andrew Collins: But they were all doing it, so they drew a crowd.

Michelle Little: Wow!

0:06:58

And they filmed some at Boutwell?

Andrew Collins: I think so, yeah.

Michelle Little: Okay. Okay. I've always wondered about that day. [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, it was crazy. It was a wild day.

Michelle Little: Did you watch the movie?

Andrew Collins: I did, yeah. It was pretty good. It was all right.

Michelle Little: Could you see the hot dog restaurant in the movie at all?

Andrew Collins: No. No, you couldn't see it. They just filmed on the side.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Andrew Collins: Did they film inside the theater? I don't remember.

Michelle Little: I don't know.

Andrew Collins: I think they were just outside.

Michelle Little: I still haven't watched it. I need to watch it.

Andrew Collins: Yeah, you need to watch it.

Michelle Little: But I've read that they filmed in Boutwell, and then, of course, the famous fire escape scene.

Andrew Collins: Yeah. Right.

Michelle Little: And then, were there also some office buildings in the theater complex there?

Andrew Collins: Yeah. The Lyric Building had offices upstairs at one time. They had two dental labs, made false teeth. Back then they used to make 'em by hand.

0:08:00

Now it's all computerized. There was a jewelry person up there. At one time there was a chiropractor. But once I got there, there was only three or four people up there.

Michelle Little: Okay. Okay. And so then, that kinda dwindled out, the office part?

Andrew Collins: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Michelle Little: Okay. And then, you expanded the restaurant at some point.

Andrew Collins: Right. Yes.

Michelle Little: Can you tell me about that?

Andrew Collins: Well, I think around [19]95 the space next door to me came available and they came and offered it to me, so we signed the lease and all and we closed the Lyric, and then we knocked out the walls, enlarged it. We had a pretty good amount of space in there. It was, like, a thousand, twelve-hundred square feet. So we had, like, forty-eight items. At that time we expanded our menu, too. We went with gyros, chicken fingers, wings, fries. All we had was

potato chips. And it was only seven feet wide and thirty feet long, so it was two-hundred-and-ten square feet.

0:09:01

And when we expanded our menu we did full breakfast, hashbrowns, grits, eggs to order, toast, the full thing.

Michelle Little: Mmm, that sounds good. [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, I know. We did club sandwiches, patty melts. And we didn't do all that-- we had, like, ten items before. Then we went to forty-eight. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: So did your staff grow at that point?

Andrew Collins: Yes. Not much 'cause of the system we had. At that time, my wife was alive, and she was working with me at the cash register, so she took all the orders. Then it was me and probably two other people.

Michelle Little: Right. And then, were you staying open-- how did the hours of the restaurant change?

Andrew Collins: Well, eventually we opened at seven and closed at four, so that's the way it was when we closed. Now, on days when the Alabama Theatre had certain things, we'd bring both my daughters, their husbands.

0:10:02

We would have six people behind the counter when the Alabama Theatre had, like, dance recitals that lasted from seven in the morning till eleven at night, we'd stay open all those hours.

Michelle Little: Okay. So even after the Alabama Theatre closed, they would still have events?

Andrew Collins: No. This was after they reopened.

Michelle Little: Oh, okay.

Andrew Collins: And the new Lyric, and they reopened and did everything.

Michelle Little: Okay. Okay. And so, when did you kinda notice that the dinnertime crowd-- when did you actually make that shift to closing earlier?

Andrew Collins: When, Loveman's, all the department stores closed, 'cause they were the ones open late and that's what people would come to see. And a lot of the offices kinda dwindled down. There weren't as many people working. So they'd eat lunch and then they'd go home at five o'clock versus staying around, shopping, doing whatever they had to do.

0:11:05

Michelle Little: Yeah. Let's see. So then eventually y'all had to close.

Andrew Collins: Right.

Michelle Little: Can you tell me a little bit about that process?

Andrew Collins: Well, when they decided to redo the Lyric-- I'd already opened this. When they decided to redo the Lyric that's when they gave me a ninety-day notice to vacate. We

opened here in-- well, we didn't open here. I bought it as the Metro Bar, and I changed it over. In late August we closed and made the renovations that we did, and we reopened towards the end of September. Then I got the notice in November.

Michelle Little: Did you have any idea?

Andrew Collins: No, they weren't really telling me. I'd say, "Y'all gonna kick me out when y'all do this?" Like, "Nah, you're okay. You're gonna be all right." [Laughter] Well, not.

Michelle Little: Oh, my God.

0:12:02

Andrew Collins: Once they did it, I already had this and now I've got Cayo Coco, so . . . I still miss the hot dog business a lot, so we still sell all that stuff here at night.

Michelle Little: Yeah. They're good! [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: Yeah, I know. I know. It's the same thing we sold there.

Michelle Little: Okay. So when you bought this, you said it was the Metro Bar.

Andrew Collins: Metro Bar. It opened as Metro Bistro. Jeff Baker opened it.

Michelle Little: All right.

Andrew Collins: And I think that was [19]90s. Then he sold it to two other guys, and then they decided to get out, and that's when I bought it. I was already lookin' to open a bar. I was lookin' at locations. And when this came open-- all we did, we changed the bar top. We made all the seating-- and we've made changes as we go. It's always evolving.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So you had the hot dog restaurant. Why did you think, oh, let's start a whole new thing? [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: Well, I kinda hang out in bars so I thought, well, wouldn't it be a good idea for me to own one?

0:13:02

So that's when I started looking and thinkin' about it. I knew I wanted to do a cocktail bar, so that's when we started lookin'. That's when we changed this. We used to have live music in here but then I went to the round tables so we could make it a conversation bar where people could talk. And so that was a decision I made early on.

Michelle Little: Yeah. Did you look at any other locations or think about different [spots 0:13:34]?

Andrew Collins: Yeah. One of the locations I looked at was where Paramount, where their game room is, but not the main part where their food and all is. But I thought it was too small for what I wanted to do.

Michelle Little: Right.

Andrew Collins: So that's when we moved here.

Michelle Little: Do you remember this street-- when you were growing up and even all when you had the Lyric, do you kinda have a memory of what all was on this street?

0:14:00

Andrew Collins: I know this place used to be a pawn shop at one time. And there was Yielding's Department Store on the corner next to us, but I don't remember the rest of it. I think they were just office buildings. It wasn't much retail. My brother-in-law had a hot dog stand where The Florentine is called Tony's Terrific Hot Dogs. So he had that. That's the only time I came over here was to go see him.

Michelle Little: Yeah. There were so many hot dog stands at one point.

Andrew Collins: There was a bunch of them. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Why do you think we don't have as many now? [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: You know, I don't know. I think 'cause the growth of the city, they're kinda kicking everybody out. Pete's Famous, he died so he had nobody to take it over. Then my brother-in-law, when they decided to redo the Florentine Building, he had to leave. And he retired. He didn't do anything.

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Then mostly the buildings are being renovated and they run the old guys out. There used to be probably fifteen hot dog stands between here and 18th Street. So there were quite a few. There were three on 2nd Avenue between 20th and 19th Street.

Michelle Little: And they were all busy.

Andrew Collins: They were all busy! [Laughter] And now they're gone. All the landlords, I guess, don't want us for some reason. I don't know.

Michelle Little: I don't know why.

Andrew Collins: I don't know either. I stuck at the Lyric through the bad times, and now it's booming on that block and they're, like, uh, you gotta go. Like, man. But I ended up okay.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Yeah, you did. You did.

Andrew Collins: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Q2: [Inaudible 0:15:53] the ice machine.

Michelle Little: Oh, yeah.

Andrew Collins: Oh, yeah.

Michelle Little: Okay. Yeah. Let's pause for a minute.

Andrew Collins: It'll run for a minute.

0:16:00

Or I can turn it off and turn it back on.

Michelle Little: Would you rather--

Q2: Yeah. [Inaudible 0:16:18]

Michelle Little: Okay. So what do you think?

Q2: Yeah, can you turn it off?

Andrew Collins: Yeah, I can turn it off.

Michelle Little: Is that all right?

Andrew Collins: I can walk back there with this?

Q2: [Inaudible 0:16:41].

Michelle Little: I'll move that out of your way.

Andrew Collins: I feel like The Matrix I'm dodging.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] I know. I know. It's good practice for The Matrix.

Q2: Oh, hold on, hold on, hold on. [Inaudible 0:16:49] Oop. You're good. Yeah. [Pause]

0:17:00

Michelle Little: Okay. So tell me a little bit more about creating this space. I read in your interview with Eric that you said, "I have the best bartenders in town," which I think you absolutely do. [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: Right. Yeah.

Michelle Little: So how did you connect with all these bartenders?

Andrew Collins: Once we got rolling and decided that we weren't gonna have a cocktail menu, that people were just gonna tell us what their favorite drinks were, they actually started coming to us, and we knew who they were. We knew who the good bartenders were. And so they started coming to us, and we were good with them. They were good.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] That was such a unique idea to not have a menu.

Andrew Collins: Right. I know. It was a lucky thing. We were trying to come up with a menu, and then we said, ah, let's just-- but while we were doing that, we were just doing it, people order what they like.

0:18:04

So we said, ah, let's just keep that. So that's how that evolved.

Michelle Little: All right. And then, what about just this décor, how did all this kinda come--

Andrew Collins: We started lookin' around for stuff. We wanted the little Sputnik lights like the space thing.

Michelle Little: Um-hm.

Andrew Collins: And like I said, the round tables and the pendent lights. And then it all just kind of evolved.

Michelle Little: What about the periodic table there, how did y'all come up with that?

Andrew Collins: Well, the opening manager just thought of that, and he did the paper airplanes, too. Then we brought the old menu board from the Lyric down here, both of these and that one there.

Michelle Little: Oh, both of these are from the Lyric?

Andrew Collins: Yeah. And these over here, too.

Michelle Little: Oh, that's really special!

Andrew Collins: [Laughter]

Michelle Little: I absolutely love that. Oh, that's great.

Andrew Collins: So no matter what I do, I always take a piece of my past with me when I go.

0:19:03

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Andrew Collins: When we did Cayo, I don't know if you've seen that wallpaper. That's my mother and father on their honeymoon in Cuba. That's what that came from.

Michelle Little: That's lovely. Oh, that's so special. Is there anything else in here that's from your past?

Andrew Collins: Let me think. I don't think so. I believe that's it.

Michelle Little: Yeah. And then, so is it Feizal that came up with the table?

Andrew Collins: Yes.

Michelle Little: And then, did y'all kind of think up all the different elements or . . . ?

Andrew Collins: We'd just make suggestions, who was here, you know.

Michelle Little: Yeah. [Laughter] Such a great idea.

Andrew Collins: Yeah.

Michelle Little: And then, what-- 'cause this is a bit of a smaller building in between two-- this is kind of a little slip in here.

Andrew Collins: Right. Yeah.

0:19:57

Michelle Little: Are there any-- and I don't know how old this particular--

Andrew Collins: My landlord sent me a picture of it in the [19]20s. It was a fruit stand.

Michelle Little: Oh! I would love to get a copy [inaudible 0:20:14].

Andrew Collins: I've got it on my phone.

Michelle Little: Oh, I would love to get a copy of that. A fruit stand.

Andrew Collins: Shoot, here comes a delivery.

Michelle Little: Oh, okay. You wanna--

Andrew Collins: Well, no.

Michelle Little: Is it for you or the . . . ?

Andrew Collins: It's probably for here. It's probably liquor, but I'm gonna tell 'em to come back.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Andrew Collins: Or leave it up front.

Michelle Little: Okay. Well, we can pause. We can pause it here.

Andrew Collins: Yeah.

Michelle Little: It happens everywhere, of course.

Andrew Collins: I know.

Michelle Little: I mean, y'all are so busy. [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: I know it.

Michelle Little: Especially this time of year.

Andrew Collins: There's always somethin' to do.

Michelle Little: Keeps you young, though, right?

Andrew Collins: Yeah. That's it. I hang around definitely with the younger crowd.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: But I got my old guys. We meet every Monday night.

Michelle Little: Oh, yeah?

Andrew Collins: Guys I grew up with.

0:21:00

Michelle Little: Where do y'all go?

Andrew Collins: Lately we've been going to Oak Hill and Homewood and then pickin' a restaurant to go to after, after a couple of drinks and several arguments.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: Then we figure out where to go eat.

Michelle Little: Y'all argue over the restaurants?

Andrew Collins: Yeah, just different stuff. One has the Golden Rule barbecue, one has Archie's Bar-B-Q, then me. The guy that owns Norton's Florist is one of us. We're all Greek. We grew up together.

Michelle Little: Oh, man! The stories y'all must know. [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: Oh, I'm tellin' you. We call it Greek Night Monday Night. Darn, there's two of 'em now.

Michelle Little: Oop, they've teamed up. Yup. Let's see. I'm trying to think what-- okay. So we know this building dates to at least the [19]20s then.

Andrew Collins: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: And there was a fruit stand. And we'll get a copy of that.

Andrew Collins: Yeah.

Michelle Little: What's it like to operate in an older building like this?

Andrew Collins: Well, there's always problems 'cause everything is old.

0:22:03

Even the newer stuff that was put in here is now old. So there's always some kind of plumbing problem or electrical, air conditioning, somethin's goin' wrong.

Michelle Little: Hmm.

Andrew Collins: Not much structural 'cause they're built pretty good, so it's mostly just mechanical stuff.

Michelle Little: Okay. All right. Let's see. They're still unloading.

Andrew Collins: Um-hm.

Michelle Little: And then, what about during COVID, how did the space operate for you guys during COVID?

Andrew Collins: Well, that's when we put the plexiglass up and we started doing every other table. Of course, we had to close for, what, a month, month-and-a-half, somethin' like that. And then we wouldn't let people sit at the bar. So business was cut way back, way back.

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And we still don't let people stand around in here. If there's not a seat available, we hold you outside till there is.

0:23:03

Michelle Little: Okay. Yeah.

Andrew Collins: That was the main thing. It was just people weren't coming out, and when they did you had to space 'em apart so they could feel safe.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Andrew Collins: Of course, everybody was masked out. Here he comes.

Michelle Little: Here he comes. Okay. So we'll pause for a minute. [Pause] Okay. Let's see. Where were we? Okay. Oh, we were talking about the plumbing--

Andrew Collins: COVID.

Michelle Little: -- and COVID.

Andrew Collins: Yeah.

Michelle Little: And so how has business ramped back up this year, or how are you feeling . . . ?

Andrew Collins: Here recently it's really gotten good. We're havin' great weekends, great weeknights, especially with Christmas. Now, maybe after Christmas it'll drop down. But everybody's home for Christmas. All the colleges are out. The kids are meetin' up again from high school.

0:24:01

So it's really goin' good right now.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Andrew Collins: And I think it's gonna continue after Christmas. It's just gonna be a different crowd. Our happy hour has changed because there's not as many people workin' downtown anymore. They're workin' from home, so they don't say, oh, let me go have a drink

and wait on the traffic to die down, 'cause there's not that much traffic, and most of 'em are already home.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: But we still get 'em, yeah.

Michelle Little: Yeah. I feel like this question has changed so much, even from a week ago when I asked you because of the Omicron variant just in this last week.

Andrew Collins: I know, yeah.

Michelle Little: So yeah, we just never know week by week what we're facing.

Andrew Collins: Right.

Michelle Little: Let's see. So eventually you brought the Lyric dogs here.

Andrew Collins: Right. After a couple of years, yeah.

Michelle Little: Okay. Yeah. So what was that like to have your old menu of--

0:25:02

Andrew Collins: Well, it felt good. People were excited. When we brought 'em back, we did a popup outside on a Saturday afternoon. There were people standing in the middle of the street waitin' to come get their order. And people were in the parking lot eatin' across the street. There was just a ton of people around here. That's my manager comin' in.

Michelle Little: Oh, all right. We'll pause again.

Andrew Collins: You can come on.

Michelle Little: Does he need help opening-- [Pause] Okay. All right. So then, in 2017, 2018 you decided to open--

Andrew Collins: To bring the hot dogs?

Michelle Little: Oh, the hot dogs. I'm sorry.

Andrew Collins: Yeah.

Michelle Little: I'm sorry. Thank you for reminding me where we were.

Andrew Collins: [Laughter]

Michelle Little: Yes. Okay. We were talking about you bringing the hot dogs back and the response. [Laughter].

Andrew Collins: Right.

Michelle Little: Okay. So yeah, I imagine that's just gone over like gangbusters?

Andrew Collins: Yeah.

0:26:00

So we had that opening popup and then people were disappointed. They were comin' during the afternoon saying, can we get the hot dogs? We were, like, no, that was a one-time thing. We serve them after four o'clock.

Michelle Little: Oh, they were tryin' to come in, like, at lunch?

Andrew Collins: Yeah.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Okay.

Andrew Collins: So they're goin' pretty good down here now.

Michelle Little: And is it the exact same hot dog that you had?

Andrew Collins: Yeah. Same sauce.

Michelle Little: Okay.

Andrew Collins: Same chili. Same ground beef sauce.

Michelle Little: Wow.

Andrew Collins: Same weenie we used.

Michelle Little: And I know not to ask you about the recipe for the sauce 'cause Eric tried--

Andrew Collins: Right. Top secret. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: -- several times to ask you about the recipe, so I will not do that!

[Laughter]

Andrew Collins: It's in a vault in the middle of the Sahara Desert underground.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: Nah. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: I love it. I love it. Okay. So then you decided to open Cayo.

Andrew Collins: Right.

Michelle Little: So tell me about why you decided to do that, how that came to be.

0:27:00

Andrew Collins: Well, we started talkin' about another bar to open. And we didn't want to do tequila 'cause everybody was doing tequila, so we decided on a rum bar. And when we found this location, it had room for a restaurant, too, although it's a small restaurant with a small kitchen. But our chef gets the food out great. But then we decided, well, let's go ahead and do the kitchen, too. Then we were, like, what food do we do? It's rum. It's Caribbean. It's South American, Mexican. It's a mix of everything. So that's when we decided to do the kinda American food but with a Latino kind of taste to it.

Michelle Little: And things were going well here, you just wanted to mix it up or . . . ?

Andrew Collins: Yeah, wanted to do something different. Now I'm workin' twice as hard.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] Right. And do you remember where else you looked for that restaurant?

0:28:00

Andrew Collins: We looked at several locations, downtown places, but we settled on that one 'cause it was brand new. They'd gutted the building and redid everything, so that's why we picked that one. And it took about two years for us to get it open once we started talkin' about it. I think we started talkin' about it, like, 2017, so it might've been two-and-a-half years. And then we finally made it open. Then COVID hit, so within six months we were closed. [Laughter]

What can go wrong? Then they started all the construction, so they had the cones blockin' all the parkin' places every day. I would go out there after they left and move 'em back up on the sidewalk so people could park.

Michelle Little: Yeah. And that's for the hotel that's . . . ?

Andrew Collins: Well, the hotel's now open and all the construction stuff is gone as of last week, so there's no cones anymore, and no barrels. No fences up.

0:29:00

Michelle Little: That's great.

Andrew Collins: I know. It's made a difference 'cause it really hurt us as far as the walk-up people go 'cause when they had the fence up there was only that much room to get between the fence and the edge of the patio, so people were havin' to squeeze through. But now they're just, hey, we can go in there now.

Michelle Little: Yeah.

Andrew Collins: Plus, it blocked us. You couldn't even see us unless you knew where you were going.

Michelle Little: Right. Yeah. So I imagine for tourists that must've been really . . .

Andrew Collins: Yeah. Yeah. Now the hotel's opened as of Friday, so we'll see how that goes.

Michelle Little: Okay. And have you noticed an uptick in tourists?

Andrew Collins: Yes. We get people from all over comin' in now, from the Elyton, so we get people from New York City, Chicago, all over comin' in. They're, like, man, these drinks are great.

Michelle Little: Man.

0:29:59

And at some point, you moved downtown.

Andrew Collins: Yes.

Michelle Little: Had you lived downtown before? Did your family live downtown?

Andrew Collins: No, I never did. I grew up in Homewood and we had a house in Mountain Brook, and that's when we bought this building and we redid it, and that's when I moved in. So I've been there twelve years now, or maybe thirteen. I'm not sure.

Michelle Little: And what prompted you to want to live downtown as well as work down here?

Andrew Collins: Well, people were just startin' to move downtown at the time we bought this building. My wife decided, hey, let's redo it and live in it, so that's what we decided to do. But she died halfway through the construction, so she never got to live there. But the funny part of it is that my dad's restaurant was on the corner of 17th and 3rd, and I live halfway down on the same block.

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So who'd have thought when I was born that I'd be livin' on the block that my dad was operating a restaurant when I was born. And I've got his sign in my loft. They had the Hav-A-Tampa signs. I don't know if you remember those. They were glass and they would paint 'em on the back, and they were promotin' their cigar, and they'd have [**steak grill** 0:31:25], then Hav-A-Tampa cigar on the bottom, and it had a big picture of a cigar.

Michelle Little: Wow.

Andrew Collins: And it was, like, red, black, and gold and it's real shiny.

Michelle Little: I love that.

Andrew Collins: Yeah.

Michelle Little: So do you remember what was in the building that you live in?

Andrew Collins: They sold electrical parts. And it also used to be a place called Regal Andre. It was a beauty supply store way back.

Michelle Little: What about the rest of that block on 3rd, do you remember anything else there?

Andrew Collins: I don't remember too many of 'em. There was some loan companies, the little loan shops.

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There was a piano company on there. There was a restaurant on the opposite corner of my dad called Sarris's Restaurant. And that was about it. I can't remember the rest.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] It's been a while.

Andrew Collins: Yeah.

Michelle Little: As you look back over the years, what do you think were some of the pivotal-- downtown has sort of had this rollercoaster.

Andrew Collins: Yeah.

Michelle Little: Do you think there were dominos when certain things closed or when certain things opened that kind of really triggered these shifts?

Andrew Collins: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. When the department stores closed business went way down 'cause nobody was coming downtown unless you worked here.

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Then they started opening up the offices outside of Birmingham, so the people that were workin' downtown were movin' to the suburbs.

Michelle Little: Yeah. So maybe, like, when the Pizitz . . .

Andrew Collins: Yeah. Pizitz, Loveman's, Blach's. There was Newberry's, too. That's where the McWane Center is now, on that corner.

Michelle Little: And then, what do you think really started this kind of revival of this new life that downtown is seeing right now?

Andrew Collins: Well, when I reopened the Lyric Hot Dogs, everybody was saying, why are you doing this downtown; why are you doing this downtown? I'm, like, I love downtown.

And so as soon as we reopened, we were doing boomin' business, like five times the business we were doin'.

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And I started thinkin', well, people are startin' to not be as afraid to get out downtown. Then several people started movin' in these old buildings, started renovating the old buildings. That's when we decided to redo ours. But I think the main thing is, once we opened Collins, is all these young people started comin' downtown that lived in the suburbs. People say, oh, do all your customers live downtown? I'm, like, no, just a small fraction of 'em do, 'cause they're like us, when they get off, they go home. They don't go out and drink every day, every night. So that's when the young people started comin' down here. And then Bamboo opened, and El Barrio opened, Paramount. And I get older people comin' in all the time here sayin', yeah, my kids told me to come down here. They come here all the time. So now we're getting the older crowd, too, and people are comin' down here and they're seein' all these people and kids walking around the streets.

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They're, like, oh, you know, I never realized Birmingham was like this at night. We thought it was dead. No. These kids are goin' from one bar to the other, they're walkin' till two o'clock in the mornin'. So people see that now and they're, like, okay, maybe we'll go give it a try. So that's what the catalyst was, I think, is the young kids decided to come down here to come here, and then everybody else saw what was happenin', so they opened up places. So now we've got a multitude of bars and restaurants open down here. I think there's more comin'.

Michelle Little: Yeah. I feel like I read about a new place in the business journal every day.

Andrew Collins: Every day.

Michelle Little: Would you have ever thought in the [19]80s--

Andrew Collins: No.

Michelle Little: To me, the [19]80s was probably kind of the bottom, you think?

Andrew Collins: Yeah. Kinda that's when everything started to change.

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The buses went on strike one time so all those ladies that were riding the bus weren't comin' in, 'cause they had to get rides to work. It seems like everything affects downtown more than the suburbs.

Michelle Little: Do you remember how long the bus strike lasted?

Andrew Collins: It was probably about eight months.

Michelle Little: Eight?

Andrew Collins: It was a pretty good while, I believe. I'm not sure. I just remember we were real slow. [Laughter] I think that's when we started closin' at four instead of stayin' open late. We had a police strike at one time. Crime went down 'cause the crooks were scared to rob anybody 'cause everybody was sayin' well, we're armed now. So the crime actually went down till they came back. [Laughter]

Michelle Little: That's fascinating.

Andrew Collins: I know.

Michelle Little: Was that in the [19]80s, you think?

Andrew Collins: I think. I think it was.

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Maybe late [19]70s, [19]80s. Yeah, it was kinda funny.

Michelle Little: [Laughter]

Andrew Collins: They would interview shop owners saying, are y'all worried about the police? Said, "Nah, we got guns down here now." It went down. I guess the crooks read the newspaper.

Michelle Little: They researched before.

Andrew Collins: Yeah. Yeah.

Michelle Little: Were you ever robbed at the Lyric?

Andrew Collins: I was. A guy came in at, like, eight o'clock in the mornin', pulled a pistol on me, took my money.

Michelle Little: Were you the only one there?

Andrew Collins: Well, there was an older guy that used to come in every day. He pretty much was on the streets, but he would go in the missions every night. He had someplace to go. And he would hang out in there and talk to us, and he was in there. But he was older.

Michelle Little: Well, thank goodness that's all.

Andrew Collins: I know.

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Michelle Little: Well, so I feel like of everyone I've interviewed you might have the most complex view of revitalization, and so what are your final thoughts of everything that's happened to you over your career downtown, having to close the hot dog stand?

Andrew Collins: Right.

Michelle Little: What do you think about the push to revitalize on the whole?

Andrew Collins: I think it's most of these developers that are comin' down here. They started building the condos, then they went from condos to rental units. And now they're goin' back to condos. I think it's generated by what the demand is. I think when the younger people started saying, hey, we can't afford to buy a condo, they started doin' apartments.

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And I think some of 'em are even reasonable. But I think that; I think the people that moved downtown. Now, like I say, the people that come in from the suburbs-- 'cause there's not enough

people that live downtown to support these places, so everybody is coming from the suburbs, from the outer limits. I think that's the main reason Birmingham is doin' so good right now.

Michelle Little: Yeah, for sure. Well, is there anything that we haven't talked about that you want people to know about your story and the places you've created down here?

Andrew Collins: Just hard work and hiring good people. I've hired the best people there are in Birmingham to work in my establishments, and that's made a big difference. 'Cause people are always saying, hey, your staff was so good. They treated us right. So I think that's the main thing. You hire good people to be around you.

Michelle Little: How do you keep good people?

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Andrew Collins: Well, we really kept them a pretty good while till COVID hit. Then COVID made it harder, and I don't know why 'cause we were still open. We weren't laying off people except when we had to close. But I think a lot of people just decided, hey, I'm gonna go do somethin' else. I want a office job, I don't want to work till two, three o'clock in the mornin' anymore. So I think that's what it is. And I think they get burnt out, 'cause they're goin' full speed for three, four, five hours. We open at four. They get here at three. We close on weekends at two o'clock, so that's a long day.

Michelle Little: What's kept you goin' all these years?

Andrew Collins: You know, I just enjoy life. I enjoy what I'm doin'. I love hangin' out with people and talkin' to 'em, and I look forward to comin' here. I look forward to goin' to Cayo.

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So I think that's what's keepin' me going. Plus you just feel younger when you're workin', when you got somethin' to do.

Michelle Little: Right.

Andrew Collins: And I don't have to kill myself 'cause I got people workin' for me. But I work hard when I have to. I wash dishes a lot.

Michelle Little: [Laughter] And you make the hot dog sauce.

Andrew Collins: Make the hot dog sauce and the chili and the ground beef. I do all that.

Michelle Little: All right. Well, I think that's all the questions I have.

Andrew Collins: Okay. I hope it went well.

Michelle Little: Oh, I think it went great.

Andrew Collins: Well, good.

0:41:41

[End]