

## Leaving Las Vegas

### Energy. Entertainment. Endless Rehearsal. Earl Turner brings his act -- and Vegas-trained work ethic -- to New Orleans.

By Alex Rawls - Photos by Greg Miles



Kelly Keller, co-owner/manager of the Circle Bar, wants to know, and she's not alone. She, like almost everybody else in the New Orleans area, has seen the ads with Turner in a cardinal red jacket associating him with "Energy," "Entertainment" and "Excitement." But the ads don't answer her question. His look is vaguely familiar and "Turner" is a common name in music. Maybe he's the forgotten member of a famous vocal group? After all, unknowns don't get massive ad campaigns.

This question -- who is Earl Turner? -- is exactly what people are supposed to ask, says Sandie McNamara, director of events and public relations for Harrah's New Orleans. "The ad is designed to ask the question, Who is he? What does he do?" McNamara says.

The short answer? Turner is, he proudly says, the first singer since Wayne Newton to graduate from the Las Vegas lounges to headliner status. Still, if you haven't been to Las Vegas, you wouldn't know him. Vegas entertainment is dominated by 500-700 seat showrooms featuring acts such as the Scintas (the Rio) and baseball player-turned-Entertainer of the Year Danny Gans (the Mirage). By comparison, Clint Holmes of Harrah's Las Vegas is a household name, having had a minor hit in 1973 with "Playground in my Mind."

"Let's face it," Earl Turner says, "Las Vegas is the only place that makes stars out of people you've never heard of before."

TURNER WAS BORN IN FAYETTE, MO. He declines to give his age, but he began his musical career as a teenager in the early 1970s with the Earl White Revue, a Chicago-based R&B outfit playing the Midwest and South. "That was the most fun time in my musical career because I had no obligations to anyone but myself," he says, over breakfast on the back patio of Slim Goodies. "I was in my 20s and I was having a ball. I was traveling, we were having ups and downs, but when you're 20, you think you're going to live forever. Nothing's serious. So what if you wake up and the whole band is gone?"

"I woke up in Lawton, Oklahoma, in 1977 -- I remember this because it was the weekend that Elvis died, August 16 -- and the whole band was gone! I said, 'Earl, what're we going to do?' Earl said, 'We're going to play the gig in Wichita Falls this weekend.' He would find some guys, I would rehearse them, and by the weekend we were onstage playing."

Turner worked seven years with the Earl White Revue, but left after a dispute over credit for songwriting and arranging. He soon found a place in a country and western band based in Shreveport. "Imagine being in this situation," he says, "a black singer from a rhythm and blues band to a rock singer playing guitar in a country and western band. Pretty extreme. I knew the music. I grew up on AM radio, so it's hard not to know the music, and frankly, I love it. I love Willie Nelson and Charlie Rich & Razzie Bailey, Kenny Rogers. Was it my preferred choice of music? No. Was I going to make a living? Yes."

This was the Urban Cowboy era, country music was hot, and Turner was newly married with a son on the way. "That was the first job in music where I was actually getting a paycheck," he says. "I thought I had all the money."

In 1989, Turner's casino career began in the lounges of Laughlin, Nev., a town on the Arizona border. Turner's first Vegas gig was at the Dunes. "I started working the lounges since I came out of clubs," he says.

He worked his way through a number of casinos -- most of which have since been demolished, he laughs -- including a year-long stint headlining a multi-artist show at the Desert Inn. "I did 18 minutes singing Otis Redding, Sam & Dave," he explains. In 1999, Turner worked the lounge at the Rio, a second Harrah's property in Las Vegas. Three shows a night, five nights a week. "You make a decent living," Turner says, "but they work you like a dog."

At the Rio, Turner convinced management to enclose the lounge and charge a cover. When the management wanted to return the lounge to its open state, he moved into the casino's 650-seat Copacabana Showroom, where he played on the Scintas' two nights off.



TURNER HAS BEEN IN TOWN SINCE MARCH, living in a hotel. This month, his wife and two children are joining him to move into their new home in English Turn. Turner admits that he wasn't thrilled when Harrah's first presented him the opportunity to move to New Orleans. "Do you think I wanted to leave Las Vegas, where I'd established myself and where I had opportunity and my family, my kids?" he asks. "This wasn't in my plans."

Harrah's won't say how much Turner is getting paid to play five nights a week for the next three years. However, public relations director McNamara says that to accommodate Turner's show, the casino spent \$5 million to renovate a ballroom into The Earl Turner Theatre, a 500-seat venue. The set is geared to Turner's performance; in a doo-wop version of Paul Simon's "Loves Me Like a Rock," a staired stage allows band members to hang out on what looks like tenement steps. The seating is similarly tiered and gently sloping, ensuring clear sight lines. Aisles are wide enough for Turner's frequent trips into the audience.

A Turner crowd is not a typical New Orleans live music crowd. The average age of Harrah's patrons is 55. On a recent night at The Earl Turner Theatre, tour bus packages of retirees mixed in with couples on vacation, and suburbanites out for an evening in the city. As everyone settles in, two video screens remind patrons of Turner's Energy, Entertainment and Excitement. A center screen drops. The band plays a jazz fusion fanfare, while a video rapidly intercuts slow-motion sequences of clippings from Las Vegas publications. One announces that Turner was nominated for Best Performer. Another declares Turner "Party Time."

The curtain pulls back, revealing an eight-piece band and two backing vocalists. During the opening bars of Lionel Richie's "Running With the Night," Turner sprints onstage in a cranberry suit with matching belt and shoes. Before the first chorus, he's at the edge of the stage shaking hands with the people he can reach. A cynic might point out that it's just a cover of an average song, but the band isn't treating it casually and the audience isn't receiving it that way. Turner's crowd is into it.

Turner works his audience. He casually mentions his Christian upbringing, which plays well in the room. He also identifies with the parents who don't get their kids' music. Halfway through the set, he adopts a Bill Cosby-like tone when he talks about having "live teenagers" in his house. "I don't talk about me so much as I talk about my situation, my kids, my family, the music I grew up with," he says. "Those are all things people can relate to." When he isn't talking about his family, he's playing beleaguered father to his band. Like unruly kids, bandmembers comically act up, interrupt or upstage Turner. During Smokey Robinson's "Ooo Baby Baby," pianist Walter Cunningham mock-surprises Turner by singing the lead vocal himself.

The show ends an hour and 15 minutes later with an R&B version of the Stray Cats' "Rock This Town." There's no encore. Instead, Turner offers the obligatory Vegas ending, a sentimental goodbye to the crowd. Turner says he hopes they had fun, and that they'll tell their friends about the good time they had at "Earl's House." Following that, he goes to the theater lobby to shake hands and sign autographs.

ONE WORD CONSPICUOUSLY ABSENT from the Turner billboard is "music." Replacing it is the word "entertainment" -- which in casinos means involving the audience. If music involves the audience, that's good, but if involvement can be achieved through other means, that's good, too. "Our customers love to feel welcome," says John Payne, general manager of Harrah's New Orleans. "They love to feel a part of the show. They walk out of there saying, 'He made me feel special.'"

To entertain the audience, Turner leaves nothing to chance. His band -- as everyone connected with the show and Harrah's points out -- includes New Orleanians Cranston Clements (guitar), Chuck Arnold (trumpet), Michael Skinkus (percussion) and Danielle Heim (vocals). In April, they spent five days a week, six hours a day in rehearsal. That's not always the New Orleans way.

"I've chastised people for using the 'R' word around my children," Clements jokes. "I was chafing a bit the first couple of weeks of rehearsal thinking, 'Man, does it have to be so perfect?'"

But if New Orleans musical culture celebrates the spontaneous, inspired performance, the Vegas approach is all about the polished act. "When the show started, I realized he gives it a thousand percent every night and for his timing to work, he needs the band absolutely there at all times," Clements says. "From start to finish, it's absolutely on. No moments of just hanging out."

Clements admits he had some misgivings about the show from the outset. During Harrah's first year, he was a part of a nightly second-line parade that wove through the slot machines and table games. He quit after finding the show too "plastic." So when Harrah's asked if he was interested in auditioning for Turner's band, Clements was skeptical.

"I had decided already I wasn't going to do the gig if it was plastic," he says. "If someone's out there like a Xerox machine, I tend to go to sleep pretty fast, but he trips off of the audience every night. He'll react to things people throw at him, throw different little wrinkles into things. Obviously, he has things he's going to do, but he keeps it alive because it could get real stale if he didn't."



Elements of Turner's current show have been in place for years. A 2001 review from the Las Vegas Review-Journal mentions the opening video montage and a number of songs including McFadden & Whitehead's 1979 disco classic "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now." In 2001, Turner was doing a comedy bit about Mystikal and what's wrong with the kids' music. Now, it's a goof on 50 Cent.

Turner is upfront about how long songs have been in his set. "'The Dock of the Bay' -- I've been doing that for 20 years, easy," he says. Some might consider playing the same songs night after night, year after year, musically stultifying. For Turner, it's part of polishing the act. "We take notes on [the show]. This worked -- why, and so forth," he says. "That's what good comedians do."

"Many of the things I say come from my reactions to the audience or past audiences' reaction that I know work," Turner says. "It's trial and error every night because I can say something one night that is really funny and the next night it won't be as funny. The reason for it might be my expression. My expression

wasn't the same. I didn't sell it right. Or the timing wasn't right. When you put in a new song, you have to learn how to work that song. All of it I've learned from actually doing it onstage."

Turner has been a student of showmanship throughout his career. "I learned from everyone whose back I watched," he says, quoting Joe Guercio, Elvis Presley's musical director in the '70s. "I picked up from everybody, but I had to adapt it to what worked for me." From Earl White, he learned the importance of appearances. "He was one of those guys you know is conning you but you like him anyway," Turner recalls. "He was always about perception. What people think they see isn't necessarily what's there. We didn't have any money but we always looked like it. If we had four people in the band, the stage was set up for eight. We'd set up equipment we didn't even use."

That philosophy extends to wardrobe. "There's nothing worse than having the audience look better than you do," Turner says. "That hit me very profoundly in the early 1980s when I went to see Lee Greenwood -- I'm a big Lee Greenwood fan -- and we're dressed to the T's, my wife and I, and this guy comes out in a pullover. I'm thinking to myself, 'You and I already have a problem because I look better than you.'"

Being in a country band in Shreveport further shaped his thinking about entertaining. After playing to black audiences on the Chitlin' Circuit, he began performing for a primarily white crowd. "If you're a black performer working in front of a black crowd, you have a certain amount of automatic acceptance. If you were working for a white audience, the first thing you have to do is break down that automatic wall."

For Turner, the quintessential entertainer is Joe Tex. "Joe Tex was one of those performers I saw once and understood why nobody wanted to follow him," he says. "He wasn't a great singer by any stretch of the imagination, but if you saw that guy live Š. Man! He had the audience eating out of his hand. He knew every entertainment trick in the book."

Turner was less enchanted at a James Taylor show. "I'm a huge James Taylor fan. Longest concert I've ever been to in my life. Why? Because he played one song after another. Somewhat entertaining in some places, somewhat funny in some places but very sporadically. Presentations can become really long and drawn out if there's not a certain something that ties you to it and that ties it together. To me, entertainment should be an experience. You should captivate people in such a way that they don't know what time it is. That's crucial to connect with the audience, to make them feel like at the end of the day, they met somebody they like.

"In some cases," he continues, "the performer should work a little harder at connecting with the audience. It may be a word or a story -- something that people can connect to. Š I try to take my life story and not make it about struggle or the usual things and make it a people experience, so that they feel not like they're sharing with a black entertainer. They're sharing with another human being, and that's calculated. It's thought out."

THE WORD "CALCULATE" MAKES SOME people nervous -- particularly in the context of a casino. It sounds like what people do before they take advantage of you.

New Orleanians are understandably wary of calculation. In 1991, the late Christopher Hemmeter's pitch of casino gambling as the answer to New Orleans' economic woes bore an unpleasant resemblance to the musical *The Music Man*. Is it a coincidence the failed riverboat casino complex he owned was "River City"? The New Orleans land-based casino wasn't supposed to compete with local clubs and restaurants -- until it argued after its 1995 bankruptcy that it couldn't survive without a restaurant and a live music venue. Eventually, it got both.

Local casino critic C.B. Forgotston isn't surprised. "Food and entertainment, along with hotel accommodations, is the key to a successful casino," he says. "In 1992, no less than (Las Vegas casino developer) Steve Wynn himself told me that there had never been



a financially successful, free-standing -- meaning no hotels, food or entertainment -- casino anywhere in the world." Forgotston argues that casinos have an unfair competitive advantage, because they can subsidize their restaurants and entertainment with gambling revenues.

Harrah's representatives disagree. The average take per customer is around \$47 a visit -- \$48.70 in March, according to State Police. Even if the average visitor to Harrah's gambled, saw Earl Turner and ate at the Besh Steakhouse, they point out, he or she would still have only spent hours in the casino.

"The way we convince people to come here instead of going to Las Vegas, Lake Tahoe, Atlantic City, Shreveport, Lake Charles," Harrah's Payne says, "is 'Come to New Orleans. While you're here, you get the restaurants, whether it's Emeril's or Restaurant August, or Brennan's, play the slot machines. Go to the new Tournament Players Club (TPC) golf course, stay at one of the hotels.'"

Still, many are skeptical -- and that skepticism extends to the sudden appearance and promotion of Earl Turner. "Musicians ask why bring Earl Turner to town when there are so many who can do what he does but better?" asks Topsy Chapman, who performs in Harrah's Jazz Court lounge. Singer and saxophonist Gary Brown, who performed for years on Bourbon Street, echoes that thought. "I think someone local would be ideal because that's what people come here for," he says.

"I asked some of the same questions everybody else asked," says Turner. "When I got here in March, I had to do some soul searching. Do I deserve this? Is this going to work? How's it going to work? What made this possible? Who am I as an entertainer? What do I bring to this wonderful musical community?"

Payne says Turner isn't competing with local musicians. "If people want to see the wonderful musicians that are here, they're already here," he says. "We're just adding another form of entertainment to the city of New Orleans." Still, many musicians have to wonder what would happen if Harrah's marketing money and energy were used to promote them instead of Earl Turner.

And in a way, they're right. Earl Turner is a good singer and a good dancer, but he's not better than the best singers in town, and he's not a better dancer than the best dancers in town. He's funny, but he's not the funniest guy in town. Until he went to Vegas, he had a career similar to that of many working musicians. He spent a few years in the mid-80s pursuing a recording contract, clinging to the same hopes most musicians cling to. "You put so much stock in one record -- 'If I can get that one record' -- and it just never happened."

But the Earl Turner story illustrates the musical differences between Las Vegas and New Orleans. "We have a different approach which in a lot of ways is what draws people to New Orleans," Cranston Clements says. "I think it's good for New Orleans to see someone come in and raise the bar of professionalism to a level we don't normally aspire to." Clements speaks from experience. As a member of Twangorama with guitarists Phil DeGruy and Jimmy Robinson, Clements acknowledges he has flown by the seat of his pants a little too often. "Jimmy Robinson has been desperately trying to get us to realize there's something about being prepared."

A STAPLE IN TURNE'S SHOW IS ONE of Sammy Davis Jr.'s signature song, "The Birth of the Blues." Turner's cover of the tune invites reflection on his relationship to the Las Vegas of yore. The too-easy answer would be to say Turner can't hold a candle to the Rat Pack. His voice isn't as distinctive as Frank Sinatra's, Dean Martin's or Sammy Davis Jr.'s. Turner's choice of material is less idiosyncratic, but the two acts aren't as dissimilar as they may seem.

Recordings of Rat Pack shows reveal how much shtick was recycled night after night, year after year. In interviews, Joey Bishop has talked about scripting patter and set pieces for the show. Sinatra, Martin and Davis had a gift for doing the same ad libs nightly and making them sound off the cuff. This is Turner's approach, as well. Recently, Turner invited Clements' daughter, Annie, to play bass with the band before going on tour with Theresa Andersson. "We gave her the charts a couple of days in advance so it would sound spontaneous," Turner says.

And as much as it is staged, the set changes. One night, Turner played a medley of country songs for laughs, mocking country song titles; two weeks later, when the audience erupted with applause at the mention of country music, he sang the medley straighter, omitting the punch lines that were at country's expense.

More than anything else, Turner wins over the crowd by working hard. For the hour and 15 or so minutes of the show, Turner runs, dances, sings, jokes, mugs, high-fives and does whatever necessary to move the audience. "I wish I had his energy," admires one retiree from Metairie, after seeing his show for the second time.

That's just what Earl Turner wants to hear. "Sammy Davis Jr. said not everybody's going to like what you do," he says, "but don't let them leave thinking you didn't work hard."