

Cirò's nightclub, "the queen bee" of the Strip's nightlife in post-war Los Angeles, circa 1955. | Getty Images

SUNSET STRIP

When mobsters and movie stars ruled the Sunset Strip

The end of Prohibition signaled a new outlaw era on the Strip, one that was both dangerous and glamorous

By Hadley Meares | Feb 14, 2019, 10:00am PST

It was the early morning of July 19, 1949. Mobster Mickey Cohen was hanging out at Sherry's, his favorite after-hours haunt at 9039 Sunset Boulevard. Dapper and dangerous, Cohen was holding court in what his biographer Tere Tereba [calls](#) the "no frills, smoke-filled restaurant," eating ice cream and telling tall-tales to a coterie of policemen, underlings, and press.

At one point, the hardnosed columnist [Florabel Muir](#) asked him if it he was courting danger by partying in the open on the high-profile [Sunset Strip](#). "Not as long as you people are around," [Cohen said](#). "Even a crazy man wouldn't take a chance shooting where a reporter might get hit. You're too hot."

Around 4 a.m. Cohen's exit was orchestrated by his cadre of security, including bodyguard Harry Cooper, a special agent from the office of the California attorney general. Cohen had recently ratted out a group of corrupt vice officers to their superiors, making him a mark for both bad cops and bad gangsters. As Cohen walked onto the Strip's sidewalk, Muir stopped in the foyer to buy a copy of the morning edition of the *Los Angeles Examiner*.

The Sunset Strip story

The [Sunset Strip](#) occupies a short stretch of Sunset Boulevard, but its reputation as a stomping ground of gangsters, glamour girls, rock stars and hell-raisers has held an oversized fascination for decades. This is the second in a series exploring how the Strip became the playground of the famous—and infamous.

As she was picking up the paper, Muir heard a volley of gunfire. When she looked outside, she found the Sherry's sidewalk in chaos. According to Tereba, two victims lay on the

sidewalk convulsing. A disoriented Cooper had been shot in the stomach, and Cohen, a bullet in his shoulder, was screaming instructions. A frustrated Cohen finally lifted the lawman into his chauffeured sedan himself, and the car sped down Sunset.

It was just another night on the Strip.

With the end of prohibition in 1933, the Sunset Strip, 1.7 miles of winding road between Los Angeles and Beverly Hills through unincorporated Los Angeles County, should finally have been able to go straight. After all, the elegant Sunset Plaza commercial complex was newly expanded, and legitimate businesses and apartment houses were appearing with greater frequency.

But the decriminalization of alcohol actually signaled a new outlaw era on the Sunset Strip — one that was infinitely more glamorous and much more dangerous.

The man responsible for this new, faster Strip was Billy Wilkerson, a knockabout Southerner from Tennessee who had hit pay dirt when he stared the influential *The Hollywood Reporter* in 1933.

Wilkerson had been in the speakeasy business in New York, and already owned the Vendome, a popular Hollywood delicatessen that served imported European delicacies and doubled as the increasingly influential Wilkerson's de facto office. He also sold French champagne and European liquors under the counter at Vendome. It was quite a racket for a teetotaler who only drank Coke.

He originally leased the rambling old site of the Café La Bohème at 8610 Sunset, in January 1934, as a place to store his now legal champagnes. But at the urging of movie stars like Norma Shearer and Kay Francis, he decided to also open an exclusive supper and nightclub in the space. He used his trade paper's influence to bribe and blackmail producer Myron Selznick into bankrolling a lavish opening party.

"That check, became the birth certificate to the Sunset Strip," noted the *Los Angeles Mirror*.

According to his son W.R. Wilkerson, author of *Hollywood Godfather: The Life and Crimes of Billy Wilkerson*, his father spared no expense in designing his club, knowing that pretension of grandeur was what the Hollywood crowd was after.

"He hired architect George Vernon Russell and enlisted decorator Harold W. Grieve to completely revamp the interior... Believing that a smart French-themed club would appeal to his intended customers, he ordered Grieve to create something reminiscent of Parisian sidewalk dining," Wilkerson writes. "In addition to the ornate chandeliers and striped silk chairs, the club had cream-colored walls and molding that boasted a hint of gold."



The Trocadero was the place to see and be seen in LA. | Los Angeles Public Library photo collection



Marlene Dietrich, Michael Brook, Cary Grant, and Phyllis Brook at the Troc in 1935. | Getty Images

Wilkerson named his new creation The Trocadero, which would soon be shortened to “The Troc.” At the epic opening night party on September 12, 1934, thrown by Selznick, movie industry and cafe society titans were out in full force, impressed by the club’s formal French salon and epic views of the city. But after opening night, reservations fell off, and the club was relatively empty.

According to his son, one particularly empty night a few days after Selznick’s party, Wilkerson paced the empty floor in his customary full tuxedo:

In frustration, Wilkerson instructed his maître d’, Ralph Pauley...to put up the velvet rope and keep the band playing. “Tell everyone who comes or phones that the place is booked solid for two weeks,” he

said. "That did it," said George Kennedy. "Within days, the place was jammed, with long lines outside the front door. Reservations were booked solid for weeks.

The trick propelled The Trocadero to the height of desirability. Over the next four years, The Troc would be the place in Los Angeles to see and be seen. According to his son, Wilkerson was an expert at innovation, coming up with the idea of doggy boxes for leftover food, and initiating a legendary amateur talent show on Sundays, so that he could get around regulations prohibiting dancing and drinking on that day. If Wilkerson didn't like the performers his son writes, he would shout: "Get the hook and pull that sonofabitch off the stage!"

Established stars and movie moguls also saw appearances at the Trocadero as an important part of their career. As Wilkerson Jr. explains:

A powerful lure for actors, actresses, publicists, and photographers was knowing that patrons would be mentioned in the society pages and gab columns of the Reporter. Wilkerson sweetened the deal by ensuring that regular tables would be reserved only for the most famous celebrities—and for members of the industry's PR machines... The Troc even had its own house photographer, Hymie Fink... many celebrities were petrified of Fink, who seemed to pop up everywhere; one long-standing joke among celebrities was that whenever they arrived home, they checked under their beds to see if Hymie Fink was there."

Comedian Jack Benny would later recall that "dining at the Troc was better than paying an expensive publicist." But there was also a whiff of danger that lingered over both The Trocadero and its exacting owner, which many patrons found exciting.

Wilkerson was a hard-core gambling addict, and in a secret backroom at The Troc he played endless high-stakes games of poker with the likes of Samuel Goldwyn, Irving Thalberg, and Darryl Zanuck. More ominously, he courted the friendship and protection of Eastern gangsters, including Johnny Roselli and Tony Cornero, who were regulars at The Troc. As *Hollywood Reporter* staffer David Alexander later explained: "Organized crime came to Hollywood through Billy."

By 1938, Wilkerson was tiring of The Troc. He was paying out the nose in extortion money to the mob, and asked gangster and Sunset Strip gambling kingpin Nola Hahn what he should do. Hahn suggested a little fire, which he would be happy to get started. Wilkerson agreed, and after a "suspicious" kitchen fire gutted much of The Trocadero, Wilkerson sold it.



Scenes from the swanky Mocambo nightclub: on the far left, Marilyn Monroe takes lessons with jazz musician and bandleader Phil Moore. | Getty Images

But Wilkerson was not yet done on the Sunset Strip. On January 29, 1940, Wilkerson opened a new supper club named *Ciro's*, after a bistro where he liked to gamble in Monte Carlo.

Located at 8433 Sunset, on the site of the old Club Seville (and today home of The Comedy Store), *Ciro's* was sleekly designed by George Vernon Russell, while interior designer Tom Douglas made the interior a "riot of color and texture, with red silk sofas, ceilings painted a matching red, and walls draped in heavy ribbed silk dyed pale pastel green."

As always, Wilkerson had an eye-out for his intended clientele: showy Hollywood. A large bandstand was erected, phone jacks were installed at every table for important calls, and a spotlight at the entrance greeted every star or wannabe who came in. There was a hidden women's parlor (perfect for trade ready secrets to be spilled) and again a hidden gambling parlor at the urging of Johnny Roselli.

Roselli wasn't the only gangster regular at *Ciro's*. The legendary blue-eyed mobster Bugsy Siegel was a friend, fan, and future business partner of Wilkerson's, and he also frequented *Ciro's*, when he wasn't in jail.

"When he was awaiting trial for murder in 1941, he refused to eat jail food and had the club deliver its food to his cell," Wilkerson Jr. writes. "And Virginia Hill, Siegel's paramour, frequently rented *Ciro's* for parties, counting \$5,000 in \$1,000 bills into Wilkerson's hand and telling him that if he had any other events scheduled for the evening she wanted, it was too bad."

But by 1942, Wilkerson again grew bored and became more interested in a new scheme: opening a casino in Vegas. He again turned to Nola Hahn for help, and again a suspicious fire partially wrecked *Ciro's*, affording him the opportunity to get out.

Wilkerson sold *Ciro's* to his longtime right-hand man Herman Hoover, who would make sure *Ciro's* was an important Hollywood hotspot until 1959. A realist, Hoover was forced to pay off Mickey Cohen, who ran his extortion racket on the Strip from his "clothing shop" Michael's Exclusive Haberdashery at 8804 Sunset.

Every week, one of Cohen's employees would bring over empty boxes from the haberdashery into the kitchen of *Ciro's*, and employee George Schlatter would hand over bags of cash. "As far as I was concerned, I was legitimately buying boxes!" Schlatter later told Hoover's niece Sheila Weller, author of *Dancing at *Ciro's**.



Sheriff's deputies with gambling equipment seized in 1934 in raids at The Old Colony Club, Clover Club, and Club La Boheme. | Los Angeles Public Library photo collection

Not surprisingly, gambling continued to flourish on the unincorporated Strip. The notorious Clover Club (partly owned by both Hanh and Wilkerson for a time) was operated by a handsome charmer named Eddy Neales, who was partially bankrolled by the mobster Milton "Farmer" Page.

According to historian [John Buntin](#), he catered to an entertainment industry crowd, and paid off the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department to let him run his operation in peace.

These shady realities did not deter others from cashing in on the Sunset Strip's unique cachet.

On January 3, 1941, former talent agent Charlie Morrison and his silent partner Felix Young opened the nightclub Mocambo at 8588 Sunset, an area now occupied by a commercial strip featuring the iconic Viper Room.

Designed by costume designer [Tony Duquette](#), the kitschy, tropically themed club featured paintings in garish colors by Jane Berlandina, and an actual aviary which included parakeets, macaws, and a cockatoo. It became a favorite of Hollywood's party crowd. According to historian [Mark Bailey](#), Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball loved it so much, they based the fictional Tropicana from "I Love Lucy" on it.

Over at The Players at 8225 Sunset (now home to Pink Taco), owner Preston Sturges, the legendary director of such movies as *Sullivan's Travels* and *The Lady Eve*, entertained friends including Humphrey Bogart, Marlene Dietrich, Hedy Lamarr, Orson Welles, and writers living in the nearby Garden of Allah.

The hard-drinking and effervescent Sturges would often sing with the house band, and legend has it that a tunnel led straight from the restaurant to secret assignation spot [Chateau Marmont](#). Sturges would eventually sink so much money into The Players that his friend Barbara Stanwyck [once exploded](#): "That goddamned greasy spoon is ruining you!"

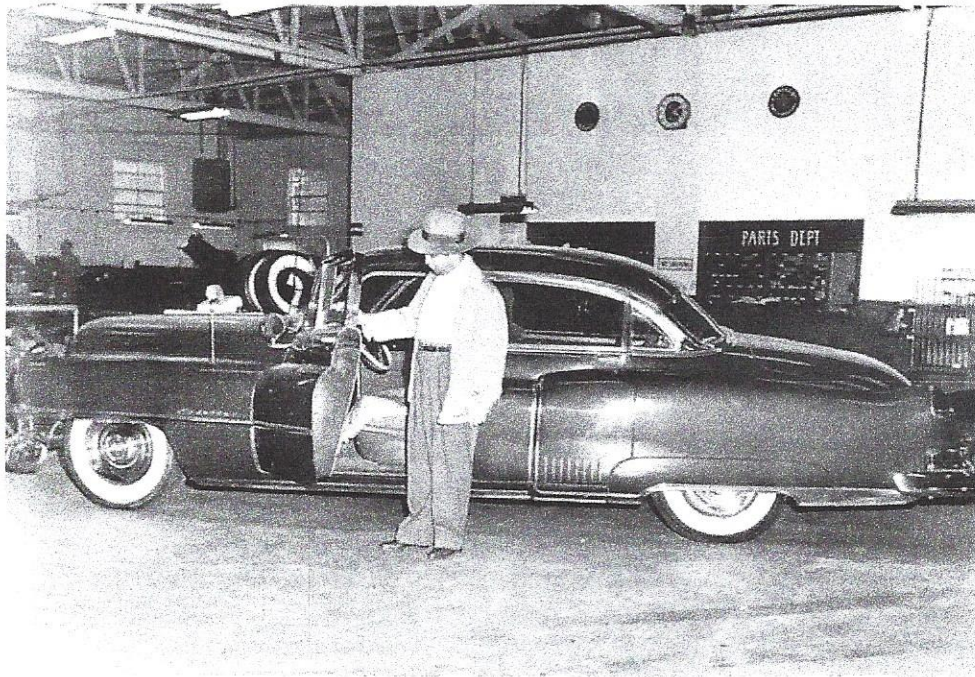
But it was Ciro's that continued its reign as the queen bee of the Strip's nightlife in post-war Los Angeles. Big stars like Nat King Cole and Sammy Davis Jr. performed legendary engagements, but the real show was often on the main floor.

Hollywood's elite were often at their worst behavior at the club. In one anecdote, Weller writes that Paulette Goddard sat serenely at a booth while director Anatole Litvak disappeared under the table. Weller also claims that the actor Franchot Tone spit in the ever-nosey Florabel Muir's face, and Frank Sinatra got in so many fistfights over Ava Gardner he was almost banned for life by Hoover.

Wilkerson's protégé for a reason, Herman Hoover was not above fabricating a scandal now and then to drum up press. In 1951, he booked the stripper Lili St. Cyr at Ciro's, making her the first dancer to headline on the Strip. The shows were instant sell-outs. According to Weller, one night:

Just as St. Cyr was artfully jackknifing her leg up through the bubbles and pulling her knee to her chin, L.A. sheriff's officers stormed the main room, flashing their badges. They arrested St. Cyr for public indecency, hustling her out in her robe. Herman—and an L.A. undersheriff—had fooled the newspaper editors...Jim Byron (a Ciro's employee) had made the tip-off call.

"Everybody on the Strip knew everybody in the sheriff's department," Byron later told Weller. "They knew what was going on. They weren't seriously interested in giving Herman a hard time."



Mickey Cohen and his Cadillac, September 1950. | Los Angeles Public Library photo collection

The sheriff department's cozy relationship with nightclub and casino owners meant that organized crime was allowed to operate on the Strip relatively unchecked. During the late 1940s and into the '50s, Mickey Cohen and mobster Jack Dragna fought for LA supremacy in what came to be known as the "Sunset Wars."

In 1948, Cohen was the target of another assassination attempt during a shooting at his Haberdashery shop. Cohen was in the bathroom in the back, and again escaped with his life.

Perhaps no story better sums up the strange co-mingling of the mob and movie stars during this era than a story told by Tere Tereba in *Mickey Cohen: The Life and Crimes of L.A.'s Notorious Mobster*.

One night in the late '40s, 21-year-old Shirley Temple left Sherry's after a night of partying. She picked up her navy-blue Cadillac from the valet and was driving down Sunset when she noticed a man's fedora sitting on the passenger seat.

"Pulling to the curb, I inspected the hat carefully, found no identification, then noticed the car upholstery was not mine," Temple later remembered. "On the floor in the back lay a long locked black leather case, soft to the touch but with something hard inside... When I returned to the nightclub, the valet tumbled over himself with gratitude. What he had delivered was Mickey Cohen's look-alike Cadillac."

While the lawlessness of the Strip may have been a boon for unsavory elements, it also continued to provide a relatively safe haven for members of the LGBTQ community. Openly out entertainment industry folks moved their businesses to the Strip. These included the celebrated former actor turned interior designer William Haines, who opened a studio at 8720 Sunset, supported by great friends like Carole Lombard and Joan Crawford.

The Café International at 8711 Sunset and Jane Jones Little Club at 8470 Sunset were both popular lesbian bars, where women tenors performed in tuxes. The infamous Café Gala, popular pickup spot of Monty Woolly and Cole Porter, was located at 8795 Sunset (which later became the legendary Spago's). The Venetian-style supper Club was owned by the fascinating Baroness Catherine d'Erlanger, an eccentric arts patron, and the singer Johnny Walsh. According to West Hollywood's [historic survey](#):

Walsh, who was manager, doorman, and performer there, "enforced standards of behavior inside. At the bar, which was often crowded with people – mostly men – two or three deep, Johnny would tell someone to sit facing forward. The inference was obvious: no groping on the premises, which in effect meant, 'Don't provoke the Vice [Squad].'"

The club also showcased musical stars including Dorothy Dandridge, Eartha Kitt, and Lena Horne, who frequented the Gala even when she wasn't performing.

Throughout the post-war years, music became more and more important to the Strip's survival. Ella Fitzgerald claimed that she owed her massively successful show at the Mocambo to the intervention of Marilyn Monroe, who convinced Charlie Morrison to book her. Innovative post-war jazz could be found at the bohemian Crescendo at 8572 Sunset, while next-door at the Interlude, early beat stand-ups were honing their craft.

But by the late '50s, the Strip had begun to lose its cachet. In 1949, a new Sheriff's captain was charged with "cleaning up the county strip and giving police service which will maintain law and order and rid the community of hoodlums and undesirable characters."

Movie stars and mobsters were increasingly going to Vegas, which was heavily advertised on Strip billboards, to party. By the mid-1950s, the Strip was becoming less shady and less trendy, and many of its legendary clubs soon folded.

For the next few years, the nightlife of the Strip lay relatively dormant, as giant office buildings and high-rise hotels replaced the glamorous supper clubs of yore. But the Strip would soon become the center of cultural conversation again, with the explosion of hippie counter-culture, social revolution, and smooth California rock 'n' roll.