

Appreciation: A Tribute to Chicago's Music Box Theatre on its 90th Anniversary

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on August 29, 2019 - 1:33pm

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CHICAGO – There are movie exhibitors, screening rooms, multiplexes and grindhouses, but there is only one Music Box Theatre, and Chicago is privileged to have it. The movie theater of all movie theaters opened on August 22nd, 1929, and is celebrating its 90th Anniversary all week at the venue, in the Southport Corridor neighborhood.

As a transplant from small town Indiana to Chicago, I wasn't used to the Windy City history of grand neighborhood movie theaters, and was gobsmacked when I first entered the Music Box, shortly after it reopened as a film "double feature" house in the 1980s. I had never visited a glory days example of the urban movie theater, where each neighborhood had its own film venue in the days before television. The Music Box was a smaller example of the escape-from-real-life atmosphere of these theaters, with its luxurious architecture and welcoming lobby, twinkling stars with projected clouds on the ceiling (I especially loved that) and European courtyard interior theater design.



The Music Box Theatre of Chicago, Celebrating its 90th Anniversary

Photo credit: MusicBoxTheatre.com

Created by architects Edward Steinborn and Louis I. Simon, it was built by the Blaine Building Corporation – represented by nearby auto dealer M.J. Schmidt – and was engineered specifically for the new “talking movie” craze. The first film was “Mother’s Boy,” a 1929 musical, designed to show off the talkie technology. Throughout its early life, it was known as a “second run” theater, showing double and triple features throughout its neighborhood history in the 1930s through the ‘70s.

As what happened to many theaters, the Music Box began to decline during the 1970s, and closed its doors for five years from 1978 to 1983, although there were unadvertised showcases of foreign language fare (Spanish and Arabic) and grindhouse porn. The revival began in 1983 with new ownership (eventually developing into the Southport Music Box Corporation and Music Box Films), and the theater revved up again with their signature “double features,” daily film themes that honored cinema history in a two-for-one format. The 1980s pre-internet newsprint calendars were a must have for any Chicago film buff, to specifically target favorites. That is where I came in, experiencing the Music Box both as one of those film buffs and eventual critic.

As a tribute to the Music Box Theatre, here are three personal memories about this magical venue, and one strange fact that speaks to its location, location, location.

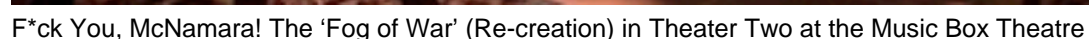


The Programming



The greatest memories are the movies screened at the Music Box. As I emerged from the era of only showing old movies on commercial television or in campus revivals, The Music Box offered a big screen retrospective film experience virtually every night ... in an example from its famous calendar from the 1980s, one night was James Dean ("East of Eden"/"Rebel Without a Cause"), the next was "Bedazzled"/"Dr. Strangelove," and then its Murder Inc. theme was "Pick-up On South St."/"This Gun for Hire." It was like having the whole of film history (including the silent era) at a personal screening venue, ready to deliver.

My most memorable early experiences – among the hundreds of films I’ve seen there over the years – includes “Dr. Zhivago” on the big screen for the first time in the 1980s, and the four hour “La Belle Noiseuse” in 1991 (it had an intermission). Recently, I was privileged to absorb “2001: A Space Odyssey” in glorious 70mm (The Music Box has a multi-format screening capability). But the most memorable single film was ...



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Before I started doing regular film criticism, I would seek out the art films that the Music Box often exhibited. In 2003, I took in a late night showing (in the Music Box's then new Theater Two screening room) of "The Fog of War," directed by legendary documentary maker Errol Morris. The subtitle is "Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert McNamara," the Defense Secretary architect of the Vietnam War under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson.

Why is this now obscure documentary the stuff of personal Music Box legend? There was a thirtysomething man across the aisle from me, obviously drinking (the classic sound of beer bottles hitting the theater floor). He was well into several drinks, when he stood up with about ten minutes left in the film, and screamed at the screen, "F*ck you, McNamara!" and then ran at full speed out of the room and the Music Box. I've often pondered why he did it – he was too young to have served in Vietnam – and I've also pictured him running full speed into the night, passing the concession stands like a blur and onto Southport Avenue. Where have all the flowers gone?



White Christmas Sing-along



The Music Box Theatre Holiday Sing-along, in the film 'Solstice' (1994)

Photo credit: Jerry Vasilatos

In December of 1994, four lost souls wandered into the Music Box Theatre, to take in a screening of their sing-along "White Christmas." The 1954 holiday film was a standard for years, but the Music Box has made it a legend. I was one of those lost souls, in a group looking for some Christmas cheer, and the event delivered. Now it is a Chicago tradition, with the iconic organist Dennis Scott and Santa Claus leading the sing-along and the crowd adding their Rocky-Horror like shout-outs to the screen. Some people do the double feature (WC is paired with "It's a Wonderful Life," naturally), but I opt for bringing ever-changing groups to the White Christmas sing-along, now for 24 straight years. See you for the 25th in 2019 (but get tickets early, it sells out quickly).

NOTE: There is a locally-made film called "Solstice" (1994) directed by Jerry Vasilatos, that includes a scene of the Music Box holiday singalong back in the day. It is available by [clicking here](#). [21]



The Sister Theatre



Sister Acts: The Ramova Theatre and The Music Box Theatre

Photo credit: MusicBoxTheater.com

The Music Box Theatre is a miracle of timing and location. The Southport Corridor, like most of Chicago, had a severe economic downturn after the 1960s, and as was mentioned the theatre closed for several years beginning in 1978. Besides the true luck of the ownership who saved it (and their good karma emphasis on classic cinema), the neighborhood has revived substantially and is now a destination. The Music Box Theatre itself has been restored to amazing modern vintage glory with the addition of a bar/lounge attachment, and is now one of recognized centerpieces for cinema in the whole country.

But did you know it had a sister theater? The Ramova Theatre on the Southside (interestingly enough, near White Sox Park, as the Music Box is near the Cubs' Wrigley Field) opened the same week as the Music Box in 1929, with the same design team. But it's economic downturn never recovered, and it has been closed for over thirty years. I discovered this fascinating fact while giving Blues Brothers tours of the Southside. Will the sister ever emerge again?

As an ideal superlative, if there is a film venue in "heaven" it would be exactly like the Music Box Theatre. So in this anniversary year, stop by and toast this Chicago "Jewel of the Cinema." May it live another 90 years, and another 90 after that. As the prime example of the "movie theater," it is THE ultimate destination to contemplate the art of film.

The Music Box Theatre is located at 3733 North Southport Avenue, Chicago. [Click here](#) [22] for MusicBoxTheatre.com.



[23]

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