the mad mix
MONTROSE, THE HEART OF HOUSTON
by Thorne Dreyer | Illustration by Kerry Fitzgerald

The Montrose was and is a uniquely Houston-kind of bohemia, a mad mix made possible by the city’s no-holds-barred, laissez faire form of growth. And, ironically, it may fall victim to the very same zoning-ephemeral mentality, as so many of the area’s old sites are being replaced by townhouses—from-Hell.

When Al Reinert and I wrote about the Montrose for the April 1973 Texas Monthly (they subtitled it “The Strangest Neighborhood East of the Pecos”), we were sure didn’t have to put in for mileage. We were already there—hanging at Prufrock’s and Zora’s and Anderson Fair.

In many ways, Montrose was the heart of Houston back then. It had a social vitality and a sense of community and a tolerance for diversity that you didn’t find elsewhere in this sprawling adolescent megalopolis-on-the-make. It had lots of weirdness, and as we would discover, was steeped in history...

Like the legendary intersection of Montrose and Westheimer, where the underground newspaper Space City! was peddled to passing motorists, demonstrators protested the Vietnam War, and long-haired hitchhikers just in from the Haight caught a burger at Prince’s...

The eclectic mix of cool old houses (from Victorian Epic to Ramshackle Plywood) and vintage clothing shops and galleries and strip clubs and health food stores and junk shops and newstands and radical collectives and artist studios...

And the rock concerts. I first heard the 13th Floor Elevators at Jubilee Hall and Bruce Springsteen at Liberty Hall—and Townes Van Zandt at Anderson Fair (where we had black parties and crowned the “Mayor of Montrose”)...

Houston’s vibrant gay community, home to Montrose Gaze and the Gay Liberation Front, and more than three dozen gay bars, including Mary’s Lounge, and Bayou Landing, thought to be the largest gay dance club between the coasts...

The Westheimer strip, called by some Houston’s Left Bank, drawing hipster suburbanites and River Oaks loungers to five blocks of European-style restaurants and sidewalk cafes...

The Westheimer Art Festival that drew thousands of tourists, dogs, kids, and street performers into the neighborhood; the Greek Festival outside the historic Greek Orthodox Church; and the massive Gay Pride Parades that rivaled New Orleans for flash and fashion...

Radio Row on Lavett Boulevard where FM stations KLOL and KILT (Radio Montrose) were pioneers of “underground radio” and KPFT, the infamous listener-supported Pacifica station, helped birth the “Cosmic Cowboy” movement, and was twice bombed off the air by the KKK...

The old house with the odd turrets and built-in birdhouses where Clark Gable took acting lessons—and Howard Hughes’ boyhood home that’s now the Modern Language Building at St. Thomas University...

And of course the Pagan Church, with its papier mâché statues and handmade signs advertising nude meditation and other esoterica. Above the door was written: “Our religion doesn’t teach sin, shame or hypocrisy. So don’t blame us for your dirty mind. With love all things are possible.”

Montrose native Thorne Dreyer was a founder and editor of Space City! He now lives in Austin where he edits The Rag Blog (theragblog.blogspot.com).