

# Texas Guinan

## Speakeasy Hostess, 1884-1933

by David Rosen

Texas Guinan ran New York's most notorious Prohibition-era speakeasy, the El Fay Club, located at 107 West 45<sup>th</sup> Street. It was bankrolled by the gangsters, Larry Fay and Owney Madden. According to a biographer, Tex "was blonde and blowsy and could match any man in a fist fight."

The El Fay opened on May 1, 1924, at the height of the Roaring '20s. A swastika embossed the front window, put there by the Fay, the taxi-cab czar. In the era before Hitler, some saw it as a good-luck symbol. This served as the only indication that it was a *speakeasy*. Texas greeted patrons with an oversized Stetson hat, shrill police whistle and a stream of invectives, most notably her legendary catchphrase, "Hello!, sucker!" She didn't so much insult her guests as welcome them with a slap on the face – and they loved it!

Her manager, John Stein, was an El Fay latenight regular and fondly called it "the first sophisticated organized rendezvous for selling liquor. It gave the public a taste of the brew which Mr. Volstead had put his curse upon," and, he noted, "it also gave the public a peep over

the transom into the glamour of the underworld."<sup>\*</sup>

He described the club as "a long smoke filled room festooned with bright colored hangings." The club was often tightly packed with small tables and chairs crowded with festive, inebriated patrons. Drinking was discreet, but top shelf – and rotgut -- cocktails were available at a steep price. Showgirls slithered through the club in scanty outfits selling cigarettes and various trinkets. A small combo played popular tunes and the dance floor was jammed with merry partygoers.



Around midnight, a stir filled the club: the Queen has arrived. Stein captures the excitement of Texas' appearance:

... Suddenly there cashed in a long, loud blast of sound from the basses; the pianist dug his slender fingers into the ivories; the leader's baton was held high and trembled like a Florida palm in a hurricane. ... "Ya ---a-a-ay, Texas," bawled the crowd.

She made her entrance, with all the night-owl energy of her roistering personality. She was gowned in clinging, flaming red. Her hair –

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<sup>\*</sup> Rep. Andrew Volstead (R-MN) led the enactment of the National Prohibition of 1919 Act that was and passed over President Woodrow Wilson's veto.

burnished gold – tumbled, brushed and curled in riotous unconventionality.

You knew she was close to forty, yet she looked rather ageless. She pranced in, her arms aloft, her crimsoned lips broadened in a brilliant smile – Why not? Look at the capacity business. And at her heels a dozen or so more semi-nude dancing girls, laughing, chattering, fluttering.

“Hello! Sucker!,” the Queen has shouted, then stood beaming, sparkling, effervescing.

Guinan fashioned what became known as café society out of her own dynamic, irrepressible persona. She was a woman of her age, now 40 years old and a bigger-then-life character who fronted New York’s toughest gangsters and for whom, as Stein noted, “democracy became her slogan, good fellowship her only standard.” She was well known for applying perfume to her fingertips so that those, as she laughed, who shook her hand had something to remember her by.

Among her more memorable contributions to popular culture of her day were the catchphrases “Hello suckers!”, “Don’t give a sucker a break!” and “Give the little girl a big hand!”\* Her toughness is enshrined in the alleged comment of one her regulars: “Reach down in your heart, Texas, and get me a piece of cracked ice.”

Texas ran a half-dozen *speaks* during the good times and drew the city’s swells. Future stars like Rudolph Valento, Ruby Keeler and Barbara Stanwyck got their start performing at one of her clubs.

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\* Some attribute the maxim to Wilson Mizner

Goodtime mayor, Jimmy “Beau James” Walker, was a club regular. Other regulars included entertainers Al Jolson, Irving Berlin and George Gershwin, who often played impromptu piano; movie stars Gloria Swanson, Clara Bow, Tom Mix, John Barrymore and George Raft (he got his start as one of Madden’s muscles); writers Ring Lardner, Damon Runyon and Heywood Brown (Brown served as one of Texas’ pallbearers after her untimely death); gossip columnists Walter Winchell, Ed Sullivan and Mark Hellinger; and well-heeled worthies like Reginald (“Reggie”) Vanderbilt, Harry Payne Whitney, Walter Chrysler and Harry Kendall Thaw (he was a wealthy playboy who famously murdered the architect Stanford White a few years earlier). Texas’ *speaks* were the place to be.

Texas was born Mary Louise Cecelia Guinan, born in Waco, TX, in January 1884 to Irish-Canadian immigrant parents – and she got her celebrated nickname as a kid. She began her career as a rodeo cowgirl and gained celebrity in early Hollywood silent films, starring in some 35 1-reel silent movies with William S. Hart, one of the first movie stars. Relocating to Gotham, she started as a Broadway showgirl dancing as part of the city’s booming live entertainment scene. During Prohibition, she was the toast of the town.

As Prohibition descended on New York, Texas was performing her cowgirl act at the Winter Garden Theatre. Emile Gervasini invited her to attend the opening night party for his new speakeasy, the Gold Room. At the gala, she is encouraged to entertain. Mixing song with storytelling, the patrons won’t let her stop and are so

pleased with the unexpected festivities that they force Gervasini to keep open the *speak* until 5:30 as dawn broke. He was so impressed he offers Tex a job as greeter. New York nightlife was never the same.

At the Gold Room, Texas created the "floor show," a Broadway staple. While she was the host and main attraction, she added Joe Fejer, a Hungarian violinist, and the pianist and composer, Sigmund Romberg, to her show. As host, Tex got \$100 a week. "Shaking hands with her customers was about Texas' only method of allurements," recalls John Stein, her manager and biographer. "She began speaking to her guests as they entered," he adds. "Texas never forgot a face or name and often some celebrity or millionaire would find himself blushing at an unexpected familiarity but she would shortly turn his uneasiness into a sort of thrill at the precocity."

Tempted by a competing offer from Joe Pani who ran the King Cole Room, she moved her show, with Joe Fejer and his band, to the Knickerbocker Hotel. A counter-offer quickly followed from Gervasini and she returned to the Gold Room. Texas was Broadway's hottest hostess.

The reopening of the Gold Room became a major Broadway social event. As an attendee recalled, the gala was "jammed with glitter and exotic fragrance." Those in attendance included former-President Woodrow Wilson's daughter, Margaret Wilson, as well as Dorothy Caruso, John Barrymore and Mrs. W.K. Vanderbilt. Tex extended a special invitation to Valentino, who briefly worked for her as a flower boy

when he first arrived in America and now was at the height of his celebrity. Valentino insisted that he would only attend with his second wife, Natacha Rambova, if Texas made sure that his first wife, Jean Acker, would not be present. Acker had a habit of greeting Rudi and Natacha "with a loud and pronounced hiss." Texas persuaded Acker not to attend.

However, amidst the opening-night festivities, the socialite Peggy Hopkins Joyce was accompanied by a strangely dressed woman. The guest was "[a]bout the wildest looking woman that Texas had ever seen," a participant observed. She wore a garish red wig, a low-cut black velvet evening gown and a diamond necklace and earrings. Most striking, her makeup was overdone in red, white and blue.

Greeting Tex, Joyce introduced the guest as the Countess of Itch from Cuba. Texas immediately recognized her as none other than Acker and saw catastrophe in the making. She warned Valentino and then made an ingenious proposition. Stein, who was in attendance, recalled, "Miss Guinan led Miss Acker out on the floor and introduced her as the Countess of Itch," the former wife of Rudolph Valentino. Mr. Valentino then came forward. "There is a gentleman who desires the honor of your partnership in the next dance, Countess," Texas says. Adding, "[l]et me present the Count of Scratch." To the song, "The Girl I Left Behind Me," the couple began to dance.

Texas was a "new woman," a '20s woman who enjoyed a new social presence, visibility and sexuality. These women were increasingly educated; they joined the workforce in ever-growing

numbers; they earned a wage and had money in their pockets; and, as they did so, they dropped their corsets and their skirts crept up to above the knee, they bobbed their hair, applied lipstick and smoked Sweet Corporals. And, with the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, they secured the vote. Most threatening, women -- as celebrated "flappers" -- were regulars at speakeasies like those run by Tex. *Speaks* were venues where "nice" girls drank Bronx cocktails, flirted and more.

Texas called upon a group of "silent partners" to start yet another *speak*, the 300 Club on West 54<sup>th</sup> Street. In addition to her brother, Tommy, her partners included the gangsters Madden, George (aka Big Frenchy) DeMange, Nick Blair and Feet Edison. The new club featured a troupe of forty scantily-clad fan dancers who, because of limited space, often performed provocatively close to the customers.

It became a popular nightspot for a virtual who's-who of the city's luminaries. Regulars included entertainers Al Jolson, Irving Berlin and George Gershwin, who often played impromptu piano; movie stars Gloria Swanson, Clara Bow, Rudolph Valentino and John Barrymore; and well-heeled worthies like Reginald ("Reggie") Vanderbilt, Harry Payne Whitney, Walter Chrysler and Harry Kendall Thaw, a wealthy playboy who famously murdered the architect Stanford White a few years earlier. Ruby Keeler and Raft got their starts at the club. Texas later ran Club Intime, at 205 West 54<sup>th</sup> Street between Broadway and Seventh Avenue, which catered to the theatre set. It became famous as an after-hours retreat for those

who had spent the evening at Polly Adler's or some other nearby brothel and needed a late-night cocktail.

The "Guinan Graduates" was the name given to the showgirls who performed at Texas' many clubs. Most were young, between 13 and 16 years. Keeler was 14 years old when she joined the line. Keeler dated Johnny "Irish" Costello, a bootlegger, but fell in love with Jolson, which caused a minor scandal, forcing her to flee New York for Hollywood and a movie career. Others who got their start working for Texas were Lillian Roth and Barbara Stanwyck as well as such lesser-know stars of the '20s as Irene Delroy, Claire Luce and Frances Upton. New York's mayor John Hylan (who Walker replaced in 1926) denounced the Graduates as a little gang of prostitutes; Tex referred them, quite motherly, as "my girls."

In a thankless effort to enforce Prohibition, the police kept inventing and enforcing new laws to close down *speaks*. In June 1928, 160 Prohibition agents raided fifteen New York clubs. Of all those busted, Texas was the only one who challenged her arrest. Her trial became a media circus as everyone knew that Tex ran an upscale *speak* and wanted her to beat the prohibitionists. At her trial, one Prohibition agent, James L. White, said he visited the club twelve times but couldn't get in on the thirteenth because it was too crowded. He also admitted spending \$360 for food and liquor. She was acquitted.

Texas was again busted in 1929 and charged with "maintaining a nuisance" at another of her *speaks*,

the Salon Royale at 310 West 58<sup>th</sup> Street. At her trial, Tex insisted that she functioned only as a hostess, serving as "a singer, dancer, welcomer and wisecracker"; she sought only to bring "sunshine into the lives of tired businessmen." She described one of the stunts that the patrons enjoyed. She had "a guest walk five times around a walking cane while holding it in one hand" and then walk back to his or her table. The patron would lose his/her balance and often fall down. Following a brief, 55 minute deliberation, the jury acquitted her. In the court room, in true Roaring Twenties' spirit, someone yelled, "Give the little girl a great big hand" – and everyone did! At a gala victory party held at her Club Intime at 205 West 54<sup>th</sup> Street, she read a telegram from Congressman (and soon-to-be mayor) Fiorello La Guardia, "Congratulations. We all give the little girl a great big hand."

Texas was not, however, a part of Gotham's other, parallel social worlds; she was a midtown "wet-zone" woman, drawn by its big drinks, big shows and big spenders. While rubbing shoulders with city swells and cultural lions, she was part of neither set. As the irony of city life would dictate, Guinan lived in Greenwich Village, on West 8<sup>th</sup> Street near Washington Square Park, but was never really part of the Village scene. She was not attracted to the ethnic, working-class peoples, particularly Italian, Irish and African-Americans, who made the Village their home. Nor was she interested in the counter-culture then reshaping the Village from ethnic neighborhood to bohemian mecca.

She rarely traveled outside Manhattan, a foreigner to the city's rapidly growing ethnic immigrant and working-class communities. And while visiting popular racially-segregated Harlem *speaks*, she had little to do with the real African-American scene, apparently never attending a mixed-race *speak*, latenight Harlem rent party or sex circus; there are no reports of black people attending her – apparently all white -- clubs.

During the 13 years of Prohibition (1920-1933), speakeasies were social venues where nightowls congregated to socialize, enjoy drinking illegal alcohol and indulging in other, often more illicit, practices. They told two intertwined stories: one is as a social setting, an illicit venue; the other as a commercial enterprise, an underworld business. Every speakeasy embodied this dual existence.

In New York, *speaks* ranged from glamorous nightclubs and stylish cabarets like those run by Texas in the swankest parts of mid-town Manhattan's "wet zone" to saloons, cafés and low-life blind pigs in neighborhoods throughout the city. It was estimated that, in 1925, 100,000 *speaks* operated in Gotham. *Speaks* were venues of social transgression during one of the most tumultuous eras of American history affectionately known as the Roaring '20s. And Texas Guinan was at the center of the festivities.

At Texas' *speaks* everyone who indulged broke the law and, while breaking the law, often rubbed shoulders with questionable characters, be they upper-class slummers, showgirls, jazz musicians, politicians, gangsters, prostitutes or pansies. A *speak's*

greatest indulgence was the cocktail, a concoction of adulterated alcohol and whatever the barkeep could mix with it. It made nights fun and lulled the nation into the '29 stock market crash and Great Depression.

Guinan was a cowgirl who became a true Gotham outsider. Her legendary character appeared in numerous Hollywood movies. Mae West embodied her in *Night After Night* (1932), costarring Raft; the '39 release, "The Roaring Twenties," has a character based on her, *Panama Smith*, played by Gladys George; Betty Hutton played her in *Incendiary Blonde* (1945); in 1961, Phyllis Diller portrayed her in *Splendor in the Grass*; and Francis Ford Coppola's 1984 hit, *The Cotton Club*, featured a character, "Vera," played by Diane Lane, based on Texas.

In 1933, shortly before Prohibition was repealed, Guinan died of amoebic dysentery in a Vancouver hospital while on a cross-country tour. As Texas once remarked: "I would rather have a square inch of New York than all the rest of the world."

**For more information:**

- Louise Berliner, *Texas Guinan: Queen of the Nightclubs* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993).
- Glenn Shirley's *Hello Sucker!: The Story of Texas Guinan* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 1989).
- John S. Stein and Hayward Grace, *Hello Sucker: The Life of Texas Guinan* (unpublished manuscript, 1941, NYPL, Lincoln Center Library).