

Club is sign of life in Warehouse District

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IN THE EARLY MORNING Aug. 29, winds in excess of 100 mph blasted the World Trade Center at the foot of Canal Street. Hurricane gusts shattered all but two windows of the recently opened nightclubs Ray's Over the River and Altitude 33 perched precariously atop the 33-floor building in a round, revolving structure.

Small tornadoes ripped through the clubs, spitting every piece of furniture onto the streets below. The brutal winds tore back three layers of wallpaper inside Altitude 33, exposing red velvet walls reminiscent of the long-gone Top of the Mart lounge.

Robert LeBlanc handled promotions and events for the two locations but the 4-month-old Altitude 33 was his prized project.

One week after Hurricane Katrina, he received a phone call from the club manager.

"They said Altitude 33 and Ray's were destroyed and probably wouldn't be reopening," LeBlanc said. "They were gently letting me down, saying if you're thinking about Altitude 33 or Ray's, to go ahead and move on because there was so much physical destruction it would take at least a year to reopen.

"I haven't been inside yet. It's kind of like a closed casket funeral. I want to remember it the way it was."

LeBlanc didn't have time to mourn. Out of the ashes of Altitude 33 and Ray's Over the River came Republic New Orleans, which held its grand opening Dec. 16 at 828



From left: Partners Remi DeMatteo, Robert LeBlanc and Luis Espinel say they opened Republic New Orleans, a music venue and nightclub in the Warehouse District, to bring life and music back to the city.

S. Peters St., the former home of the Howlin' Wolf, which moved to 907 S. Peters St.

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Republic N.O. takes over former Howlin' Wolf space

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LeBlanc and his partners in Republic New Orleans, Luis Espinel and Remi DeMatteo, said they want to bring life and music back to the devastated city.

"This was not an analytical decision. It was instinctive," LeBlanc said. "We want to provide an outlet for people to do interesting things because we need to keep people in the city and reestablish the fabric. Our mentality is to act as if the hurricane never hit."

New opportunity

As soon as word spread that Altitude 33 and

Ray's Over the River were dead, LeBlanc received a call from Espinel, a New Orleans attorney, and his wife, Sophia Savvaides. The couple asked LeBlanc if he would be interested in opening a nightclub at the former site of the Howlin' Wolf.

LeBlanc jumped at the opportunity and brought on DeMatteo, former manager of Altitude 33 and Ray's Over the River and a minority partner in Ampersand, a Tulane Avenue nightclub.

"I was a GM without a club and he was a promoter without a club," DeMatteo said.

The Republic New Orleans group moved into the 7,000-square-foot location Oct. 28. They renovated the bathrooms and floors and maintained the rough, ware-

house feel of the space, intentionally avoiding the neon and loud colors associated with upscale nightclubs.

Couches and seating areas were added downstairs where entertainment will range from Anais Patterson, Papa Grows Funk and the Kevin O'Day Quartet featuring Walter "Wolfman" Washington to fashion shows and national acts.

The upstairs will feature a more intimate lounge.

"We wanted a mix of a music venue and a lounge where the live music is not always the centerpiece," LeBlanc said.

Wolf tracks

The Republic New Orleans opening coin-

cided with another major change in the Warehouse District entertainment landscape — the Howlin' Wolf move.

After 15 years in the same location, owner Howie Kaplan moved his club down the street to the former home of The Praline Connection.

The new location increased Howlin' Wolf's space from less than 7,000 square feet to more than 10,000.

After Hurricane Katrina, Kaplan said he had offers to move the Howlin' Wolf to Dallas and Austin, Texas, and scouted locations in Houston, but decided against abandoning his home when it was at its lowest.

"You can't just walk away from your family, history and home."•