

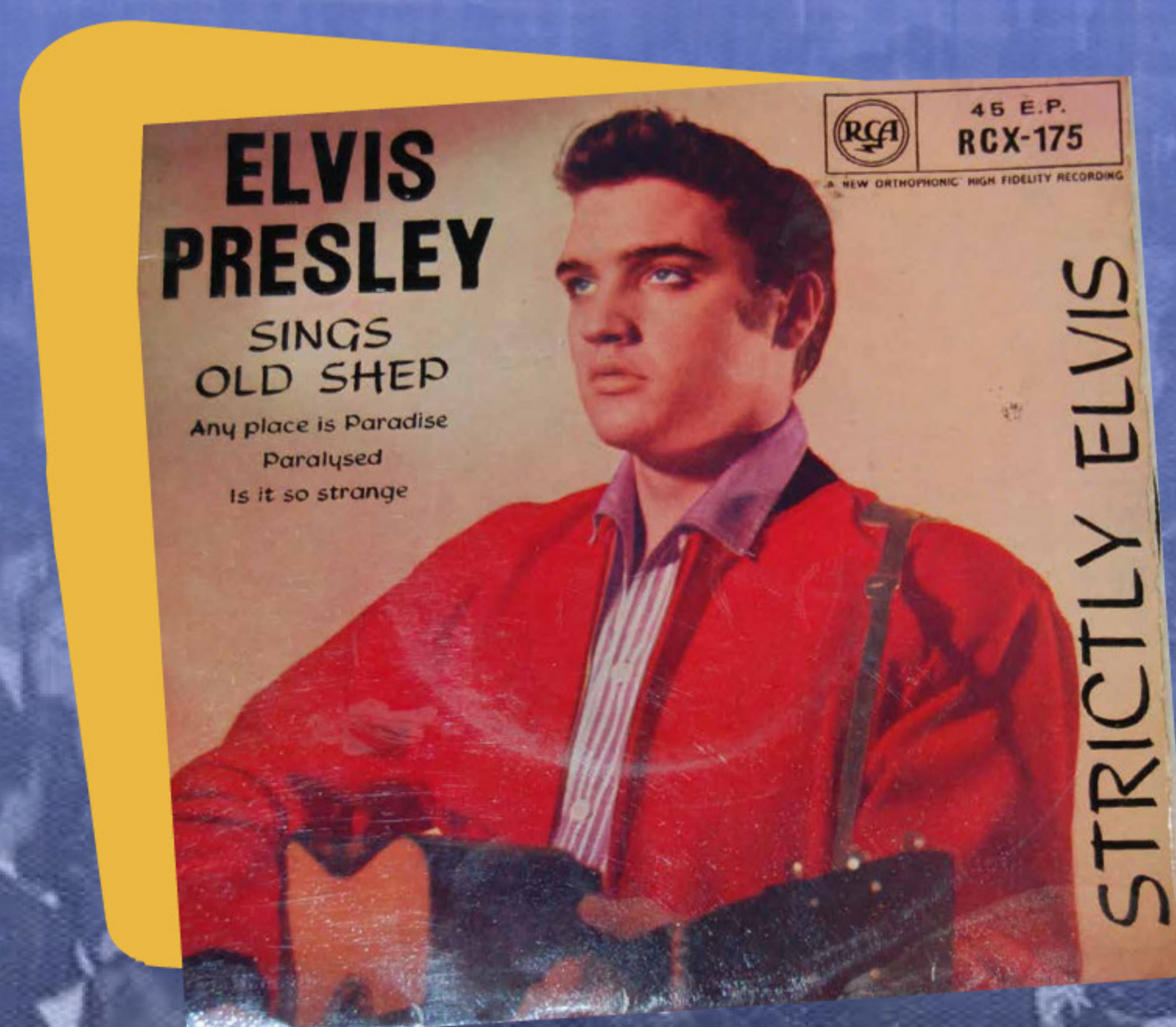
Let Me Introduce You... A History of Dance Halls in the Causeway Area

Across the Causeway area after World War Two, local dance halls and, at times, transformed community halls and other public buildings, were at the heart of the social life in our communities. Some had been venues for dancing since Victorian times, others were adapted or built for purpose. For many it is where they, their parents and/or grandparents met. These historic places are fast disappearing, if not already demolished or re-purposed. For so many in our communities, memories of the local dance halls and the music, transcend boundaries of class, education and religion.



Dance Team, Coleraine Town Hall in 1952.
Coleraine Museum Collection.

During the post-war period, following a baby boom, teenagers became a recognised phenomenon with their own culture and expectations of a better life than previous generations. Sexual liberation, economic independence, and music and culture brought directly into homes through new developments in radio and television, led to an explosion of energy amongst young people. For many it became a rebellion against the Establishment - Vietnam War, Civil Rights, Black Rights, Paris Commune, women's liberation. Here in Northern Ireland this was in the context of increasing societal tensions that resulted in The Troubles, yet young people used fashion, dancing and the new 7inch records of their favourite bands to forget about work and the realities of daily life.



Elvis Presley single 'Old Shep' 1956.
Ballymoney Museum Collection.

- 1952** King George VI dies
- 1953** Queen Elizabeth II takes the throne
- 1954** RCA introduces first colour TV
- 1955** Rosa Parks is arrested and the American Civil Rights Movement mobilises
- 1956** Elvis Presley releases his first hit single 'Heartbreak Hotel'
- 1958** Fidel Castro successfully leads the Cuban Revolution
NASA founded
- 1960** John F Kennedy elected President
The Pill is approved
- 1961** Berlin Wall constructed
First men in space (USSR)
- 1962** Cuban Missile Crisis
- 1963** Assassination of JFK
Beatles tour Ireland
- 1965** Mary Quant introduces the mini skirt
- 1966** England win the World Cup
Model Twiggy named 'Face of 1966'
- 1967** Protestors march to the Pentagon against US involvement in the Vietnam War
- 1968** Martin Luther King assassinated
Northern Ireland's first Civil Rights march from Coalisland to Dungannon takes place
Protests against Miss America pageant lead to 'Women's Liberation' movement
- 1969** Beginning of the Troubles

Portrush, 1960s.
Coleraine Museum Collection.



Towns on the Causeway Coast attracted large numbers of visitors during the summer season. Hotels started to host dances in the post-war period, particularly during the quieter winter season. During the summer season in Portrush, dances were held nightly in ballrooms and larger venues offered matinees. The Trocadero **"Portrush's Premier Ballroom"** at the White House department store, offered afternoon dancing from 4.30 to 6.30pm with trained dance instructors and dancing on Sunday evenings.

In the mid-1950s there were 264 showbands based in Ireland, and over 80 ballrooms across the island. As the popularity of dancing to bands grew, Dance Halls were purpose built, such as the Golden Slipper in Magilligan or adapted from other uses, such as Limavady Agricultural Hall. Dancing also took place in Town Halls, Parish Halls and Orange Halls in rural towns and villages.



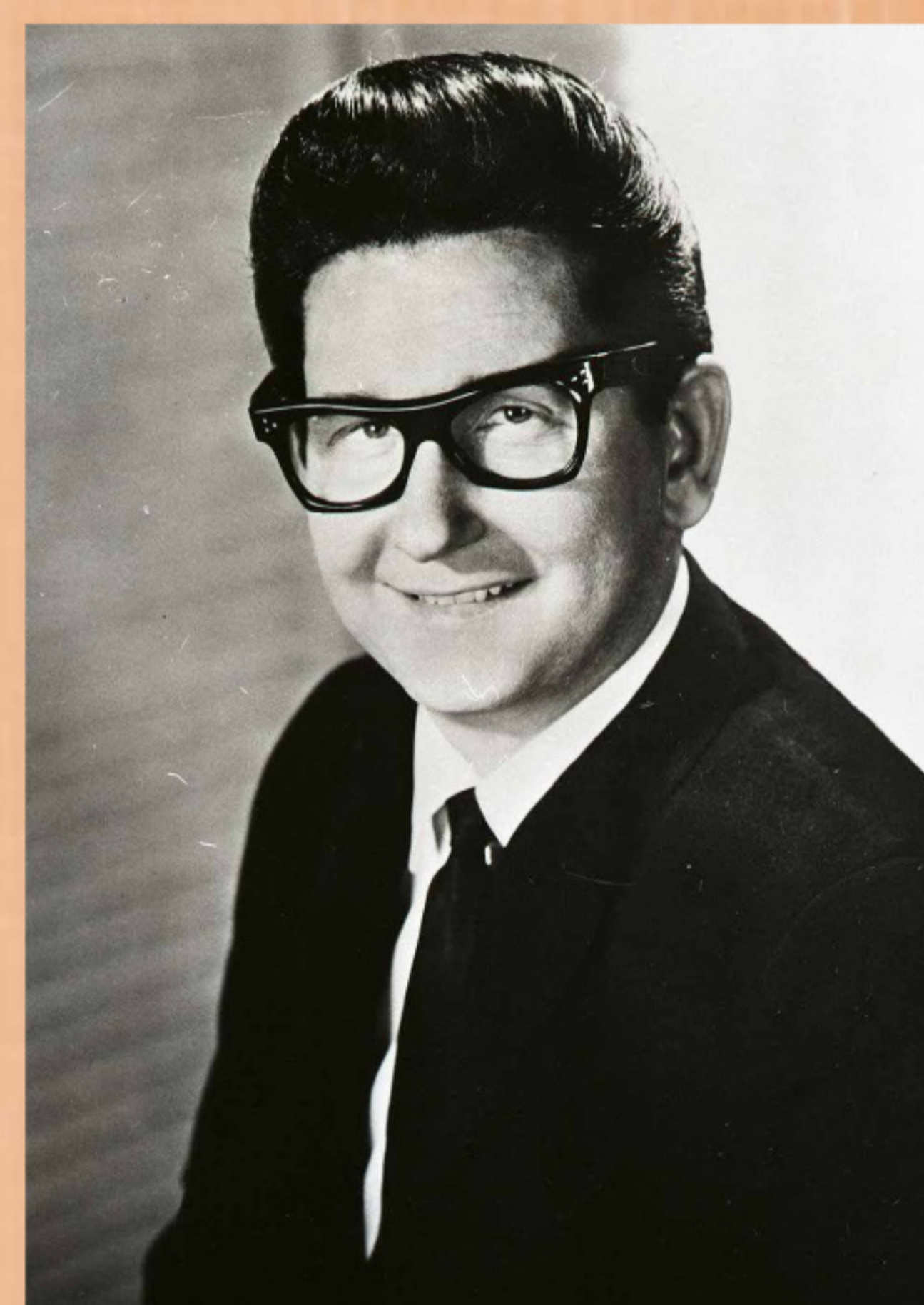
General Post Office dance in Coleraine Town Hall c1950s. Coleraine Museum Collection.



The Zane Melody Group at the Manor Hotel, Ballymoney 1963. Ballymoney Museum Collection.

The dance halls would usually include toilets, ladies and gentlemen's cloakroom and a mineral bar, selling soft drinks. None of these venues could hold a licence for alcohol and sometimes seating was provided around the edge of the hall. Venues often included transport in their ticket price to collect dancers from the surrounding towns and villages, and return them after the dance.

At the start of the 1960s it became popular to have a different band playing each night, rather than a resident band for the season. With access through radio and television to the music charts in Britain and America, bands began to tour. Local dance hall promoters such as Bobby Platt built strong relationships with band managers and tour promoters based in Belfast and London. This led to local performances by chart-topping international stars, such as Roy Orbison, Dusty Springfield, Lulu and The Who amongst others.



Roy Orbison, 1965. Courtesy Coleraine Chronicle.

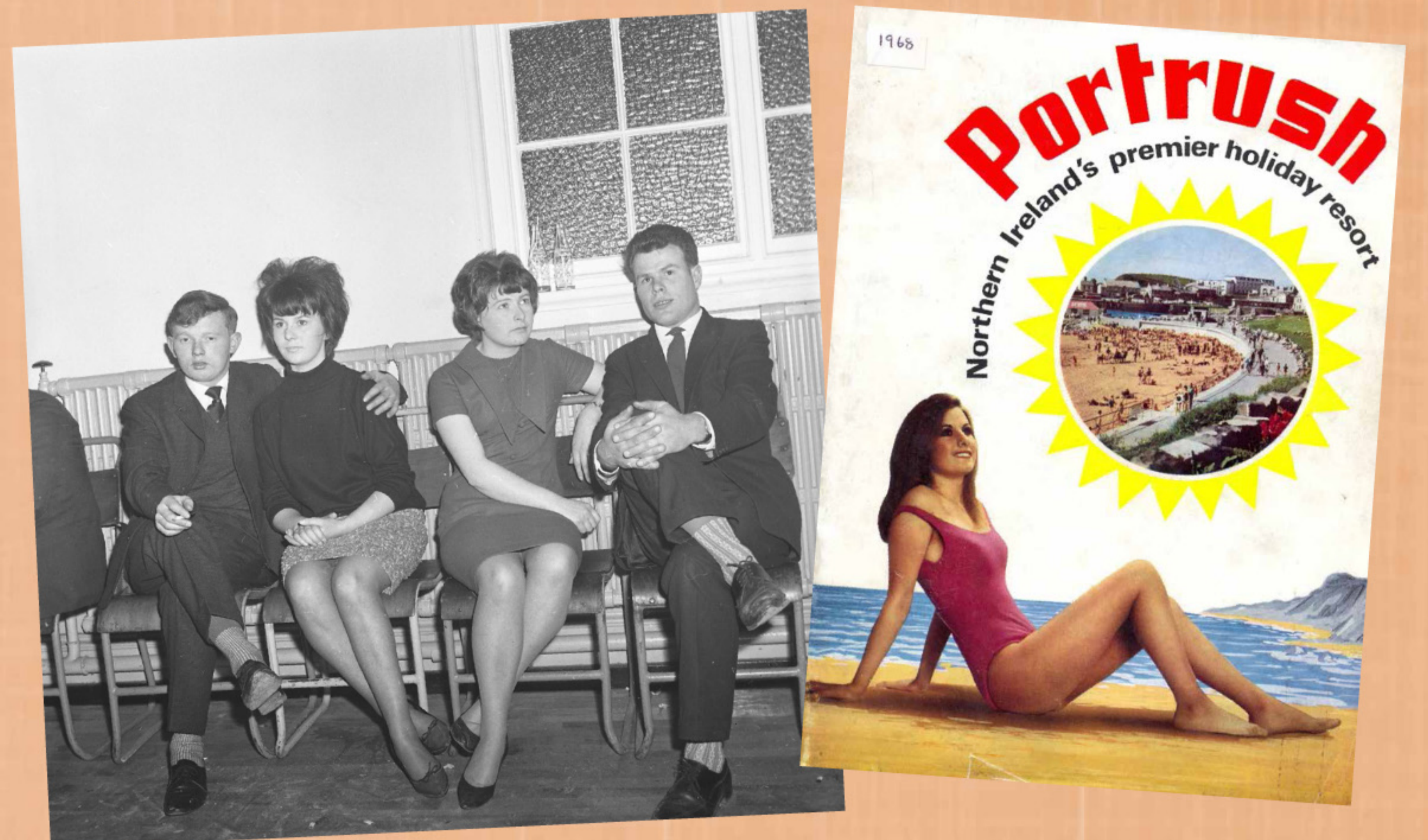


the music was all so good; you just got caught up in the whole era.

Helena Alcorn

Portrush holiday brochure 1960s. Coleraine Museum Collection.

Dancers at the Quay Road Hall, Ballycastle, 1964. Courtesy Coleraine Chronicle.

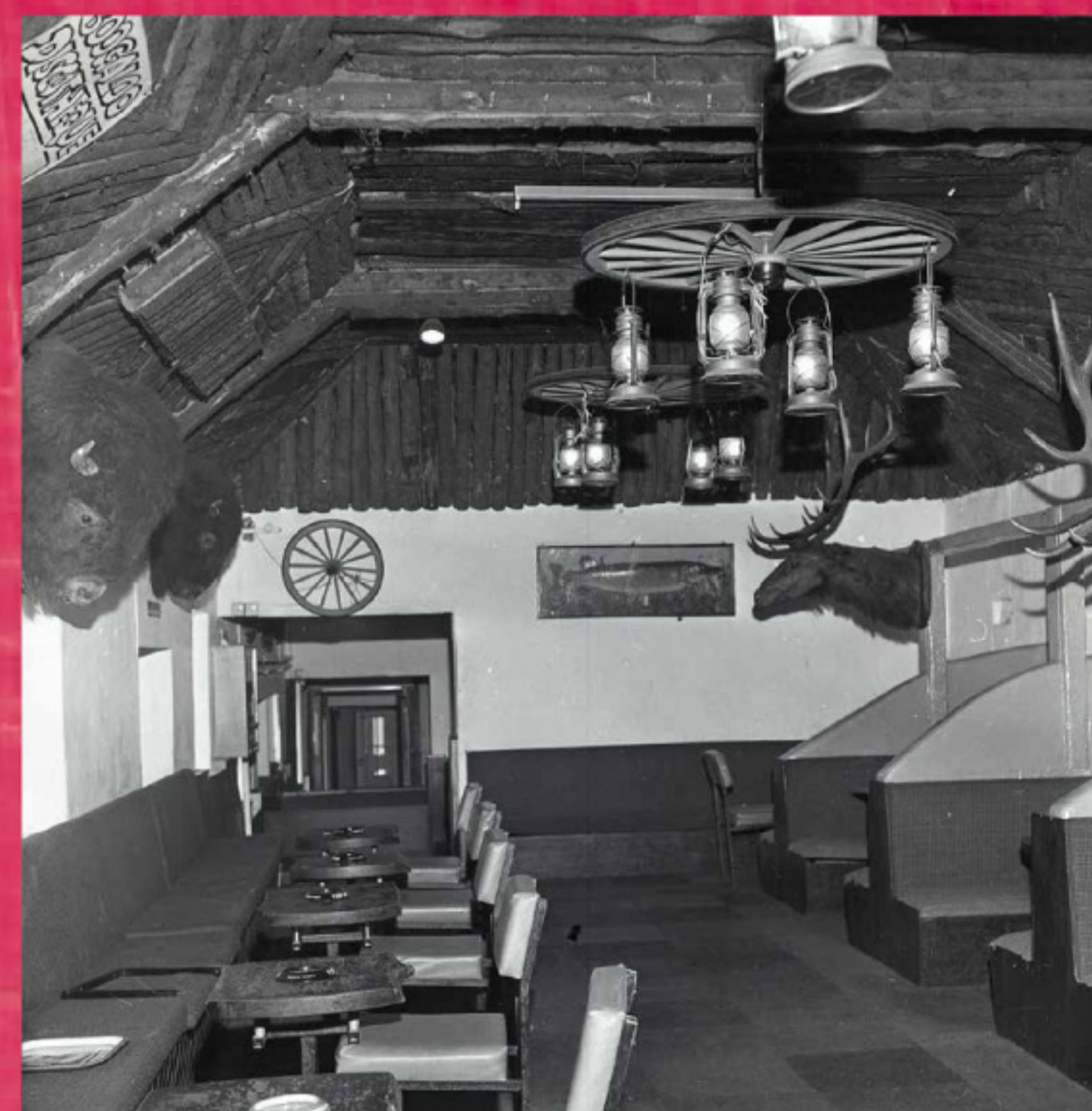


End of an Era

By the late 1960s lounge bars started to open in local hotels, offering more luxurious facilities, such as comfortable seating with proper heating and ventilation. They provided musical entertainment and alcohol in one place, such as Glenshesk Inn in Ballycastle. Lounge bars in villages without dance halls were more convenient, such as Dunloy and Garvagh.

It was not possible for dance halls to compete with more modern, comfortable, easily accessible venues that sold alcohol. Cultural changes made drinking alcohol socially acceptable, particularly for young women. Kelly's in Portrush opened in 1968, combining lounge bars with custom performance space for bands.

Music and dances were changing as 70s rock and roll and the rise of the 'discotheque' took over. The increase in the number of nightclubs and discos at the end of the 1960s meant that the showband era was on the decline, due to the lower cost of hiring one person to play records, rather than an entire band.



Boogaloo Discotheque at Kelly's Portrush, 1973. Courtesy Coleraine Chronicle.



Courtesy Northern Constitution, 1972.

“ Lounge bars...that's what finished the dance halls...you could get a drink and get up and dance.

Brian Henry ”



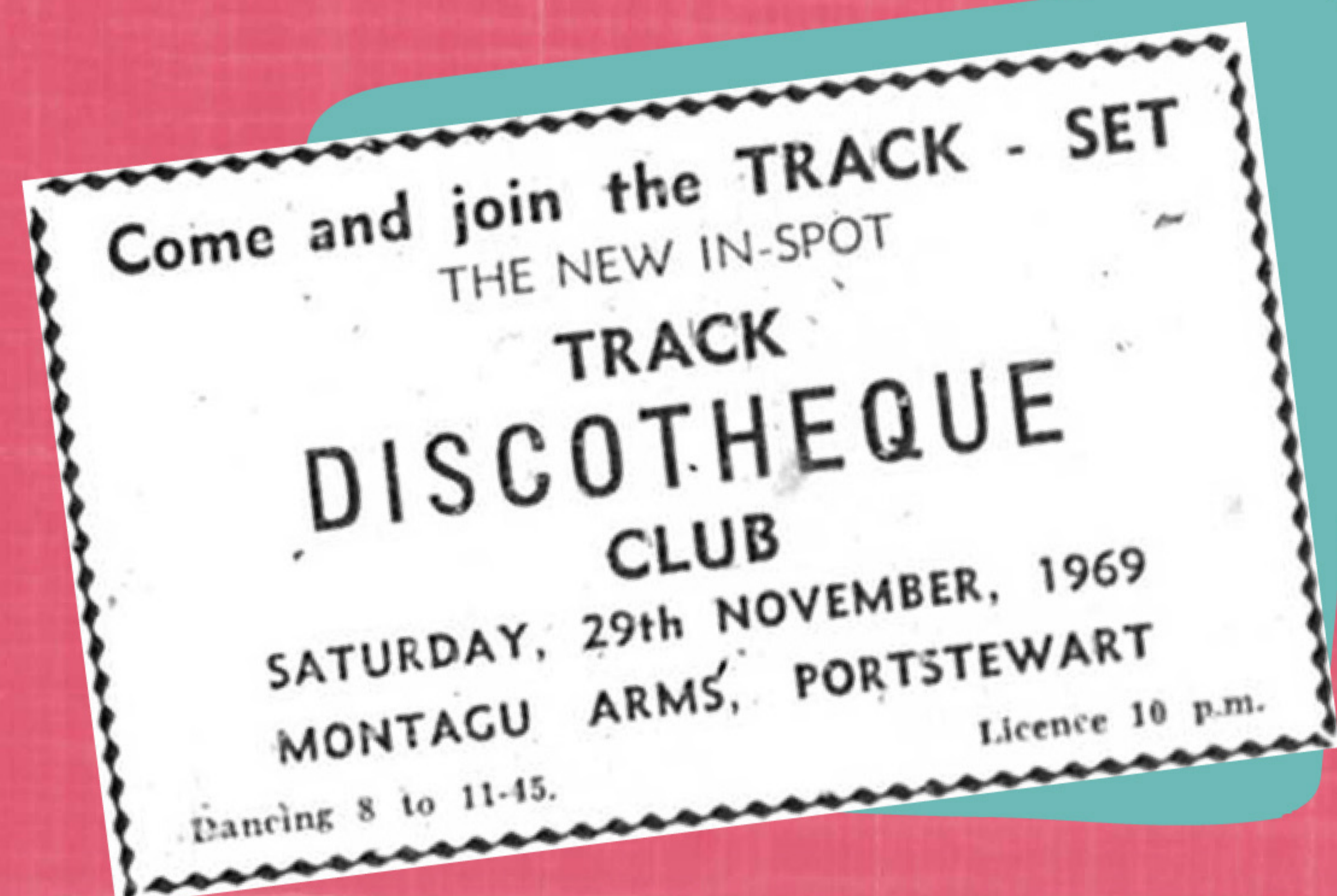
Downhill Hotel, 1973. Courtesy Coleraine Chronicle.



Courtesy Coleraine Chronicle, 1970.

In addition, the rise in popularity of package holidays to Spain and the continent meant that fewer people were spending the summer on the Causeway Coast, so dance halls were relying on local customers, rather than drawing big crowds. Although dance halls crossed the religious and political divides in Northern Ireland, the beginning of the Troubles in the late 1960s also contributed to the decline of the dance halls, with young people preferring to socialise in their own local area.

Dancing came to an end at Limavady Agricultural Hall and the Golden Slipper in 1967 with the Strand Ballroom following in 1968. The Boathouse, Coleraine and Quay Road Hall, Ballycastle closed their doors in the early 1970s while the Arcadia, Portrush continued as a music venue into the 1970s. As the venues closed and the music transformed, the memories of the 50s and 60s dance hall and showband era will remain for generations to come.



Courtesy Coleraine Chronicle, 1969.



Arcadia Ballroom, 1972. Courtesy Coleraine Chronicle.

Demolition of the Arcadia underway in 1996. Courtesy Coleraine Chronicle.

