

In ROCK THE POTOMAC author Mark Opsasnick tells how popular music evolved in the Washington, D.C. area from Colonial times to the end of the Vietnam War, with an emphasis on the emergence of rock and roll.

**ROCK THE POTOMAC:
POPULAR MUSIC AND EARLY-ERA ROCK AND
ROLL IN THE WASHINGTON, D.C. AREA**

by Mark Opsasnick

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ROCK

POPULAR MUSIC AND EARLY-ERA

THE

ROCK AND ROLL IN THE

POTOMAC

WASHINGTON, D.C. AREA

A light blue silhouette of the Washington, D.C. skyline is visible in the background, featuring the Washington Monument and the U.S. Capitol building.

MARK OPSASNICK

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ISBN: 978-1-64438-283-7

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2019

First Edition

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CHAPTER FORTY

ROCKING THE NATION'S CAPITAL

The emergence of rock and roll music was a highly significant addition to America's changing cultural landscape in the 1950s. The nation was going through a great transition between the end of World War II and the political and social uprisings of the 1950s: The population was exploding as thousands of servicemen returned to America and ignited the baby boom; republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower spent two terms in the White House as Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisconsin) stepped up the fight against the growing communist threat; the economy, fueled by corporate growth, was thriving; suburbia was developing; and television broadcasting, which had been suspended during the war years, became the primary component of mass media. Music as a worldwide commodity was becoming increasingly popular with younger audiences. The stage was set for a revolution in music.

Around the time of the accepted Alan Freed-pronounced rock and roll starting point of November 1951, a number of Washington, D.C. area night clubs and venues attained significant recognition for the tremendous musical quality and diversity of their performers and it seemed logical that some of these establishments would be suitable landing spots for different types of new musical styles as they emerged in the region. During this time there were several venues that laid the foundation for live rock and roll in the Washington, D.C. area through their booking of high-energy musical acts, the most notable of which were the District of Columbia National Guard Armory, the Blue Mirror Club, the Howard Theatre, and, over the line in Prince George's County, Maryland, the Hilltop Restaurant.

The first of several examples of rock and roll terminology to surface in the local media during this time was in the "Tips on Tables" column by Hal Rosen in the Friday, May 4, 1951 edition of the Washington Daily News. In that piece Rosen wrote about a show entitled "Lionel Hampton – His Orchestra and His Variety Show of 1951" featuring Hampton along with pianist Milt Buckner and drummer Curly Hamner that took place at the District of Columbia National Guard Armory (2001 East Capitol Street, Washington, D.C.) on the following Sunday evening. His article states: "There's a gent known as the 'Hamp' who threatens to set the National Guard Armory a-rockin' this Sunday night...Hampton brings his orchestra and variety show to the Armory this Sabbath for a three-hour concert and show."

In terms of local night clubs, the Blue Mirror Club had noticeably stepped up its entertainment schedule in the late 1940s to include more nationally known pop, jazz and R&B acts. They continued that practice into the following decade and in 1950 and 1951 the night club featured appearances by such performers as Louis Armstrong and His Esquire Combo, the Tunesmen, the Four Tunes, the Red Caps, the King Cole Trio, the Mills Brothers, the Four Keys, Louis Jordan and His Tympany Five, the Ink Spots, the Marveleers, Doles Dickens and the Whispers, Chris Powell and the Blue Flames, Erroll Garner and His Trio, the Treniers, the Billy Williams Quartet and jazz singers Sara Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald.

Of note is the fact that Herbie Fields and His Orchestra, co-billed with pop singer Bob Eberly, worked the Blue Mirror Club from Monday, November 12 through Sunday, November 18, 1951. Hal Rosen, in his "Tips on Table" column in the Washington Daily News of Wednesday, November 14, 1951, wrote: "Mister Fields is no stranger to Washington. His seven-piece orchestra rocks the Blue Mirror with a brand of rock 'em, sock 'em jazz that has customers hopping in their seats."

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The Howard Theatre, which was now emphasizing a mix of jazz and R&B acts in their live music extravaganzas, made some rock and roll overtures in advertisements for their shows that they placed in the Washington Afro American newspaper. From Friday, September 7 through Thursday, September 13, 1951 a show was co-headlined by "The All Time All American Alto King" Johnny Hodges and His All Stars and Tiny Grimes and His "Rocking" Highlanders. Next, a show that ran from Friday, September 28 to Thursday, October 4, 1951 was headlined by Herbie Fields and His Great Orchestra and included a performance by R&B singer Madame Marie Knight, whose promo implored fans to "Rock to the rhythm of 'On Revival Day' and 'Shady Green Pastures.'" Lastly, a special "Battle of the Blues" at the Howard that ran from Friday, December 7 through Thursday, December 13, 1951 pitted Larry "Rocking Rhythm" Darnell ("Star of 'I'll Get Along Somehow'") against Wynonie "Mister Blues" Harris ("Star of 'Bloodshot Eyes'").

Another major night spot in the area that experimented with a variety of musical entertainment was the Hilltop Restaurant, which was located in Coral Hills, Maryland, right at the intersection of Marlboro Pike and Benning Road, directly opposite from what was then Mike Young's Café. Throughout 1950 the Hilltop Restaurant featured the fast-paced "jive" music of Sonny Kast and His Band, a high-energy jazz-pop group which in the ensuing years would morph into the Three Jacks and gain prestige as one of the area's first and most dynamic rock and roll bands. While Kast and his mates held down house band chores, the Hilltop Restaurant brought in pop singers such as Tod Mason, Jeanne Lee and Cathy Mann, and an array of exotic dancers like Fifi Darlene, Autumn Rhaiens, Jo-Jo Denning and Sandra Seers to please the crowd. They also included in their bills comedians such as Freddie Vincent and Frankie Farr, and often hosted specialty acts like the London Dancers.

In 1951 Sonny Kast moved his outfit from the Hilltop Restaurant over to the Penguin Restaurant in Southeast Washington, D.C. The Hilltop Restaurant then employed two house bands, Billy Burke's Orchestra and Lee Mason and His Orchestra, and brought in entertainers such as pop singers Harold Terry, Nancy Ford, Norty Michels and George Ackers, comedienne Louise Potter, and exotic dancers Bobby Todd, Therese Carroll, Laura Paterson, Gloria Marlowe and Jane Cooper.

Things took an intriguing turn on the local music scene when a Philadelphia-based jazz-R&B outfit called Murray Schaff's Aristocrats descended upon the nation's capital in the fall of 1951. The band's non-stop upbeat music mixed traditional jazz covers and raucous R&B originals and their dynamic stage show literally had audiences rocking and rolling in the seats. The band's Washington, D.C. debut took place with an electric run at the Blue Mirror Club where they were second-billed to the Billy Williams Quarter from Monday, November 19 through Sunday, November 25, 1951.

The appearances of Murray Schaff's Aristocrats as a support act to the Billy Williams Quartet went over so well, the Blue Mirror Club decided to bring the band back for an extended four-week stay that began on Monday, December 24, 1951 and lasted until Sunday, January 20, 1952. Included in this engagement was a second-billing to jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald from Monday, January 14 to Saturday, January 19, 1952 that reportedly drew capacity crowds every night. By this time Schaff and his band, for all practical purposes, were performing music that was in the process of being classified as rock and roll, complete with sides of up-tempo jazz featuring three-part vocal harmonies.

When the Blue Mirror Club bookings concluded, Murray Schaff's Aristocrats moved over to the Hilltop Restaurant. They opened there on the night of Tuesday, March 25, 1952, headlining a bill that included trapeze artist Alma Bray and the duo of Kast and Abernathy (Frank "Sonny" Kast and Bill Abernathy, "Washington's Favorite Jivesters").

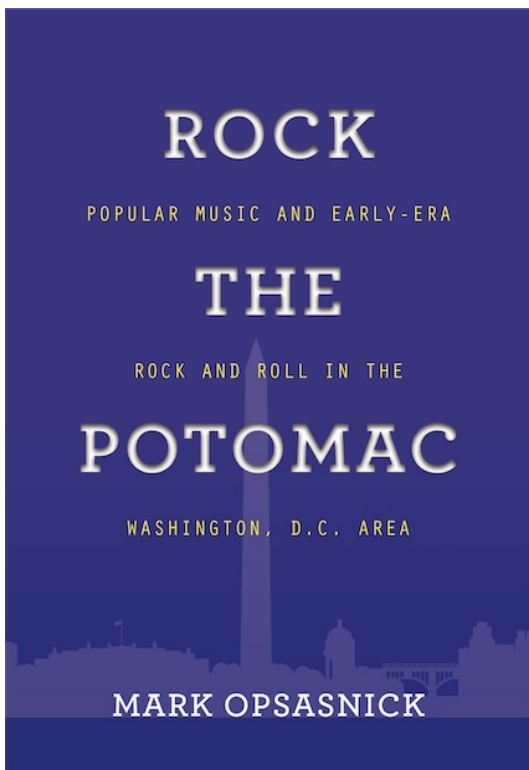
A box advertisement in the Washington Daily News on their opening day cried out, "HERE THEY COME. 1952'S Skyrocketing Quintet. Rock and Roll to Their Exciting Jazz." It marked the first time the full term "rock and roll" was used to promote the appearance of a live music group in Prince George's County, Maryland and subsequent notices of a similar nature that appeared in local dailies cemented their status as the Washington, D.C. area's first legitimate rock and roll attraction.

Hal Rosen, in his "Tips on Tables" column in the Saturday, March 29, 1952 edition of the Washington Daily News helped spread the legend when he wrote: "Here's a group who wants to make you rock and roll in your seats. It's Murray Schaff and his Aristocrats, currently featured at the Hilltop...the music these boys provide is more than slightly frantic."

The band was repeatedly brought back for lengthy engagements at the Hilltop Restaurant throughout 1952 and most of 1953. During this time, ads for the group in the night club section of the Washington Daily News screamed out "Go! Go! Go!," and "Still Rocking the Town." Reviews from this popular daily announced that the band played "spine-tingling music and songs that will make you rock, roll, and bounce."

In the wake of these media announcements and the enduring success of Murray Schaff's Aristocrats, other local and out-of-town rock and roll performers began to materialize all over the Washington, D.C. area music scene. It was clear, however, that throughout the entire year of 1952 the local press didn't always know how to label these performers. When the Marveleers, a Philadelphia-based doo-wop outfit, came down to the Hilltop Restaurant for a week-long engagement that began on Tuesday, June 3, 1952, ads in the June 4 Washington Daily News announced them as "The Marveleers and their 'Rockin' Rhythm."

Other examples of how local newspapers struggled when it came to properly advertising performing artists in Washington, D.C. night clubs who were in the process of becoming rock and roll artists in 1952 include: Jack Rowe's Restaurant, which was headlined by local Black vocalist George Eades, who was touted as a "Sensational New Singing Discovery;" Maynard's Restaurant, which was headlined by the dynamic local singer Mary Martell, whose music was described as "bounce version of pop tunes" while she herself was crowned "the go-go-go girl;" the Covered Wagon Restaurant, a notorious C&W joint a block south of Maynard's at 14th and Rhode Island Avenue NW, which was booking an up-tempo, Black, guitar-and-sax outfit called the Three of Us Trio with the simple heading "Don't Miss;" and the Howard Theatre, which promoted a week-long visit by Roy Brown and His Mighty Mighty Men that began on Friday, September 5, 1952 with ads in the Washington Afro American that pronounced Brown as "America's Foremost Exponent of Rockin'." All of these aforementioned acts were soon being billed throughout the land as rock and roll performers, though at this point in time the term was still being digested by local media outlets and was being used sparingly.



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