

*The rousing, illustrated story of the Birchmere music hall by founder and operator Gary Oelze with music writer Stephen Moore. Performers, staff, journalists, and patrons share their stories of bluegrass, folk, blues, jazz, r&b, and more.*

## **All Roads Lead to The Birchmere: America's Legendary Music Hall**

By Gary Oelze and Stephen Moore

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*All Roads  
Lead To The*

*Birchmere*

AMERICA'S  
LEGENDARY  
MUSIC HALL

Gary Oelze & Stephen Moore



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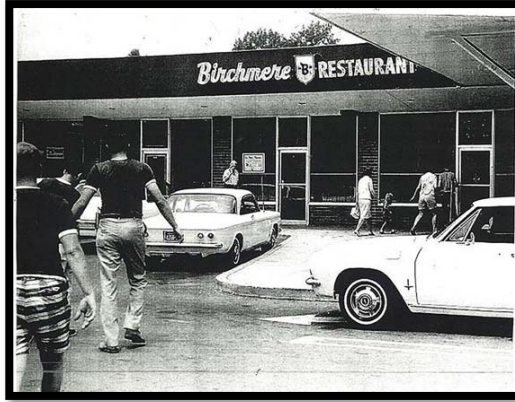
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## Chapter 1 – Birth of The Birchmere



Ray Charles gave his final public performance at the Birchmere after secretly sitting in the tech room behind the stage while his sold-out-for-months crowd finished their dinner nearby. Singer-songwriters Guy Clark, Rodney Crowell, and Rosanne Cash once held a four-hour, impromptu “song swap,” which *The Washington Post* proclaimed as the 1986 entertainment event of the year. And then there was the night when the father of bluegrass, Bill Monroe, showed up unannounced with his Blue Grass Boys, marched on to the stage, played for 45 minutes, and then strolled off.

After almost 50 years of music at the Birchmere, there are hundreds of beguiling stories like these to tell. Many moments stand out as markers that built the reputation of this durable music venue.

The name came from Dr. Frederick Kinsman, an Episcopal-turned-Catholic Bishop in Delaware in the early 1900’s. Seeking to create a peaceful estate, Bishop Kinsman built a stately home on ten acres in Woodstock, Maine. He named it Birchmere in honor of the numerous birch trees on the property. He eventually resigned his religious ordinance and

spent his remaining years as a professor of modern church history at Catholic University in DC.

In the 1940s, the Birchmere name found a second home at a summer camp in Milford, Maine about 140 miles south of Kinsman's Woodstock home. There the Birchmere Inn Dining Room and Cocktail Lounge featured live dinner music by local musicians and clambake and lobster specials galore.



*1950s postcard of the Birchmere Hotel, Cabins and Cocktail Lounge.*

It was the fond boyhood memories of those camp cabins and dining room that prompted the first owner of a Shirlington restaurant to adopt the name for his new business.

The modern Birchmere began as an unassuming suburban neighborhood restaurant, nestled between an A&P grocery and an aquarium store in the Claremont Plaza Shopping Center on 2721 South Wakefield St., Arlington, VA.

However, the true creative starting point of the modern Birchmere is literally gas in glass. It is the neon sign, designed by Richard Luxemburg, the late owner of the still-in-business Services Neon Signs Inc. in Springfield, VA. This now-distinctive glowing blue emblem has graced all three incarnations of the Birchmere and has served as an iconic memory for decades of grateful audiences. Technically, neon gas heats red when it is electrically charged. The Birchmere sign contains argon gas which produces its blue color. The gas

is also original and has never been refreshed. It just keeps on glowing.

When the sign was refurbished 15 years ago, the seasoned serviceman who arrived was so impressed by the sign that he requested the attached small "Services Neon" name plaque as a keepsake when his work was completed.

### *Act One*

Gary Oelze was managing a Peoples Drug store when he became friendly with a Baltimore native named William Hooper who helped direct the Maryland and Virginia Milk Producers Association. Gary recalls, "Mr. Hooper, a gentleman, would come in and have a cup of coffee with me. One day he told me his intention to buy this little restaurant as an investment and asked me if I would manage it for him. He knew I had an understanding of the restaurant biz from my father, owned a grocery store and barbeque restaurant. Hooper offered me a salary and stock options to be his 'operator and manager.' I eagerly accepted the position."

On April 4, 1966, Bill and Gary took over the Birchmere. Hooper later became the president of the Diners Club travel division, and his attention to the business waned.

On the corner near the Birchmere Restaurant was the Jack and Jill Cue Club, a famous pool room beneath a Drug Fair pharmacy. Open 24 hours a day for 14 years, all the major pool players then came through the 32-table billiards palace.

Jack & Jill's owner, Bill Staton, was a world-renowned pool player and high-stakes gambler, and founder of the Weenie Beenie chain of hot dog restaurants. "Weenie Beenie" became his nickname. It was Staton who gave pool player Rudolf Walderone his nickname, Minnesota Fats. Gary reminisced, "I met Minnesota Fats at J&Js once, at a time when allowing women in that pool hall was the big news on the block."

"Weenie Beenie" did the trick shots for the Martin Scorsese movie, *The Color of Money*, the sequel to the classic pool film *The Hustler*. Staton also once appeared on the TV show *I've Got A Secret*. Bill's secret trick was his ability to sink a full rack of balls on the table with one shot.



Hillbilly music clubs and other “honky-tonks,” as Gary calls them, were ubiquitous in the DC area after World War II. People from Virginia, North Carolina, and other states came to the recession-proof Nation’s Capital looking for jobs, and when they came, they brought their music with them. The music of the Stoneman Family, Buzz Busby, Mac Wiseman and many other like-minded musicians inspired by the likes of Bill Monroe, and his Bluegrass boys, fueled the rising popularity of this fast-paced new hillbilly music.

Ironically, Gary noted: “I was never a true bluegrass fan. I loved the country music of Hank Williams, but I took notice of an ever-growing taste for new kinds of bluegrass in DC when a radio program named *Bluegrass Unlimited* premiered on local public station WAMU in 1968.” This show was hosted by Dick Spotswood and produced by engineer Gary Henderson, both bluegrass and old-time record collectors. The duo became beloved local radio legends for their knowledge and dedication to American roots music.

It was also at WAMU where Patricia Maloon, a government worker became the broadcaster, Katy Daley. “I wasn’t going to use my maiden name of Maloon on the air, so Dick and I just looked at the turntable one day and saw the song “Katy Daley,” recorded by Ralph Stanley and that’s what we picked.”

Daley began proselytizing bluegrass to her radio listeners and everyone else she met. Katy recalls, “There was a new publicity director who arrived at the station in the ‘70s named Nell Jackson. She made the big mistake of asking me to tell her, ‘a little bit about bluegrass.’ I gave her the full fire hose of history, beginning with Bill Monroe buying a mandolin and proceeding, through the Washington-area festivals, clubs, organizations, and DC bluegrass musicians, especially the popularity of the Seldom Scene playing weekly at the Red Fox Inn in Bethesda, Maryland.

“Her eyes glazed over,” says Katy. “Nell responded, “So I guess you could say ‘Washington DC is the capital of bluegrass.’ It was her shorthand for ‘I get what you’re saying.’ Before long, Katy and WAMU modified this slogan as “Bluegrass capital of the world,” and added it to their on-air broadcasts, program guide, and fundraisers. The name stuck.



© Oelze

### *The Old Five and Dimers*

Not far from the Pentagon, the restaurant's local area included enough government workers to guarantee a consistent lunch crowd. Gary changed the former German food menu to burgers and fries. About 60 customers a day kept the Birchmere's lights on. Evenings, it became a local bar scene with residents of the nearby Shirlington Estates apartments relaxing with their friends.

The first live music that appeared in the restaurant began on Sundays when local musician, "Stumpy" Brown, hauled his Hammond B3 organ and Leslie speaker in to play mellow jazz. In late 1974, Gary became friends with a young British man, John Longbottom, a regular customer at the Birchmere who worked in construction nearby, turning asphalt into new Alexandria roads. Discovering that each played guitar, they started practicing together. When club regulars, Phil Coopie and Don Fuller joined them on banjo, fiddle and bass, the Old Five and Dimers band was born. The name was borrowed from the "Old Five and Dimers Like Me" song by Texas country music singer and songwriter, Billy Joe Shaver. Thirty-five years later, Shaver, himself, would sing this song on the stage of the third Birchmere.

Fuller's widow, Wanda, and brother-in-law, Jimmy Maupin sums the band up: "Everybody loved them. We thought they were tremendous. As for presentation, Gary was a good

guitarist and vocalist but not a performer per se. Coopie played good banjo but he was really quiet.



*(l to r) "Gary, Phil, John, and Don. Don lived in the nearby apartments and learned the bass to play. © E. Fuller*

John Longbottom had the English accent, and he was a hell of a guitar player. Don had the jokes in between the songs and brought the humor and liveliness to the stage."

"Do you think they might have been biased?" Gary joked when he heard their assessment.

The band slogan was "Contemporary Country with a Blade of Grass." Early song list included Rod Stewart's "Maggie Mae" and "Mandolin Wind," John Prine's "Blue Umbrella," Dylan's "Nashville Skyline Rag," and bluegrass standards like "Foggy Mountain Breakdown." Longbottom began hosting nascent "open mic" evenings at the Birchmere. "Nobody became famous," he declares. Longbottom would later develop a following himself when he played the Irish bar, Murphy's, in nearby Old Town Alexandria.

Gary downplays the relevance of The Old Five and Dimers to this history. He was reluctant to even mention them. He states, "I don't want anyone to think that I started the Birchmere as some vanity project. Many club owners are

motivated to hang with the stars to become a star, or to show how cool they are.”

Only a few acts know that Gary played music. When informed of this fact, they generally agree that this is one reason he worked so well with acts over the years. Singer-songwriter Janis Ian agreed but commented, “I think Gary was very smart not to let artists know that he is a musician and was in a band. That’s the kind of thing you should keep close to your chest. Very smart,” said Ian.

Gary notes other DC area venues in the 1970s, commenting, “There were dozens of bars and clubs playing bluegrass back then. The Red Fox, Stricks, The Quonset Supper Club, Hunter’s Lodge, William’s Restaurant, Hillbilly Heaven, and the Shamrock on M Street in Georgetown were a few. The Country Gentlemen made the Shamrock renowned in the ‘60s.

“I considered most of them dives. And then when I started adding bluegrass music to the Birchmere, there were many bar owners, promoters, and even some players whose attitude was ‘what the hell are you doing getting into *our* business?’ At that time, there was the thinking that this bluegrass pie was only so big. There wasn’t an idea of sharing or expanding the pie.” Gary imagined that despite the beer-stained linoleum and scarred wooden paneled walls the Birchmere had the potential to attract a listening crowd. Gary reveals, “I thought ‘The Cellar Door in Georgetown was the gold standard for a successful music club where respectful listening was expected. The Cellar Door, and its predecessor, The Shadows, were classy, listening rooms from the get-go.”

More “dive” than “diva”, the Birchmere “music club” could be the modest “start-up” with a hopeful future. While Gary continued in The Five and Dimers, he hired three local bluegrass groups: None of the Above, Hickory Wind —“the first group that sold out the place and raised my eyebrows,” says Gary—and The Grass Menagerie.

Leading Grass Menagerie was an extraordinary mandolinist from Japan, Akira Otsuka, whose Bluegrass 45 band was discovered in Japan by *Rebel Records* owner Charles R. “Dick” Freeland. The band toured the United States in 1971 and were featured in the 1972 film *Bluegrass Country Soul*.



*A rare photo of Akira Otsuka playing a Fender Stratocaster guitar instead of his mandolin.* © Oelze

Akira was enamored with the Seldom Scene, especially John Duffey. They were packing every Thursday night at the Red Fox Inn, were favorites on country radio stations in New York City and Washington, DC with five albums selling internationally including the 1975 double album, *Live at the Cellar Door*. Akira was also captivated by their innovative advancing musical style. By the mid-1970s, The Seldom Scene were also veterans of the bluegrass festival circuit.

Akira explains, “I was working at Rebel Records for Dick Freeland when Gary hired my band. One day Freeland asked me to take a box of records to Duffey’s Arlington, Virginia home. I told Dick about playing at the Birchmere, and it was the first time he had ever heard of the place. When I got to Duffey’s house that afternoon, I told John about the Birchmere. He too asked ‘Where?’”

“Gary would eventually hire the Seldom Scene, but don’t claim that the Scene *started* the Birchmere. It was None of The Above that began drawing people in. They launched the Birchmere,” declares Akira.

None of The Above became the first band to earn a regular weekly slot from 8:00 pm to 12:30 am on Thursdays. By this time, they had played DC clubs and were one of the featured bands at WAMU’s first bluegrass concert held September 22,

1974 in the New Lecture Hall on American University's campus. Mandolinist Dan Shipp built a long musical resume running in the same bluegrass circles as the Seldom Scene and Grass Menagerie.



*None of the Above band (l to r) Carol Nethery, (fiddle), Dave Norman (banjo), Dan Shipp, (mandolin), Les McIntyre, (guitar), and Bob White (bass). Les went on to a prominent career on WAMU radio until his passing at age 69 in 2011. His music knowledge was only surpassed only by such folks as Pete Kuykendall of Bluegrass Unlimited and WSM's Eddie Stubbs.*

© D. Shipp

Shipp says, “None of the Above had played the Red Fox Inn; the manager was Walt Broderick. A nice guy but he wasn’t particularly interested in music, especially the sound quality. And then Akira told us about the Birchmere. We went to see Gary and he hired us. It was immediately apparent that Gary was extremely interested in sound quality and investing his profits into improvements. He didn't want a noisy bar with the band in the corner.”

Gary investigated the Red Fox a few times and wasn’t impressed. “You couldn’t get a seat because all the friends of the bands had them.”

After those visits Gary bought a Bose sound system and professional lighting for the Birchmere. The once-unassuming

restaurant began its tradition of continuous improvement and Gary's attention to sonic quality became an Oelze trademark.

Many of the earliest Birchmere music club staff were essential in the club's musical start-up success. This included the indispensable early support and encouragement from Gary's future wife, Linda Hodge. It was head waitress Linda who hand-sewed the original red checkered tablecloths. Part-time waitress Teresa O'Brien arrived from Dublin, Ireland and came on board. Along with his fellow players in the Old Five and Dimers they shared Gary's goal to advance the Birchmere.



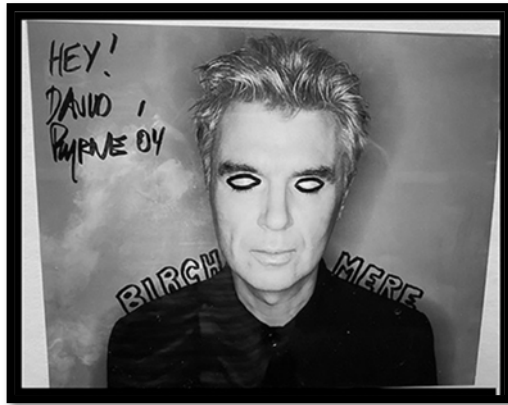
And then came the rules! Gary's quest to provide the best quality sound led the Birchmere to become the first bluegrass club to enforce a "Quiet—Please!" policy so you could really hear the music. Gary looks back: "Forcing order on a bluegrass music club was a challenge. I stole the wording on my "Quiet—Please!" in deference to the artists..." cards from the Cellar Door. I had to look up what the phrase "in deference" meant."

Gary's friend Marlise Mason did the early graphic art for the club. She designed the cards which adorned each table, politely requesting people to shut up. Marlise remembers that Gary wasn't confident that these cards would actually work to silence anybody.

It turned out that the rule cards were effective but required enforcement. "Either Moose, our doorman and bouncer, or I would ask people who broke this rule to leave. Once I evicted 12 out of 24 customers." Asked if anybody objected to the policy Gary, responded, "I always found that it would usually

be just one guy who was entertaining his group at a table. Then I'd go over a few times and ask the talker to be quiet. Finally, when I made him leave, the people at his table would thank me afterward. And I always thought, "Then why did you invite this asshole to begin with?"

It was not always the audience who broke this "Silence is golden" rule. When Commander Cody (George Frayne) and the Lost Planet Airmen played, "Cody would start his rowdy country rock show by ripping up one of the cards on stage with his fans cheering," says Gary.



*The Talking Heads' David Byrne.*

© Oelze

For the record, perhaps the liveliest violation to the "Quiet, please" policy occurred in 2004, when Talking Head's David Byrne gave a solo concert named "Finite=Alright." His two encores, "Psycho Killer" and "Once in a Lifetime" had the crowd singing and dancing, some atop their chairs. "It was a disco party," Gary recalls.

BeauSoleil, performing music rooted in the music of the Cajuns and Creoles of Louisiana, also preferred their audience loud, partying, and dancing. The band told Gary that they felt intimidated if their audience wasn't animated.

One standout early band, The Rosslyn Mountain Boys, began playing the Birchmere every Wednesday night in 1975, generating lines around the strip mall block. "We often had to



turn people away,” confirms Gary. Their “bluegrassy” name was an inside joke. Rosslyn is an urbanized Virginia city on the edge of DC known for its high-rise buildings, with no mountains in sight. The joke continued to the cover of their 1977 debut album on Adelphi Records, posing the band in front of a tongue-in-cheek pastoral rendition of Rosslyn’s skyline. The band’s co-founders Joe Triplett and Happy Acosta began as a country-rock duo, later recruiting Bob Laramie on drums, Peter Bonta, the early Nighthawks pianist (who fibbed when he told them he played bass) and Tommy Hannum on pedal steel. Hannum today plays with Wynonna Judd and was Ricky Van Shelton’s steel player and band leader for 17 years until Ricky retired.

Bonta switched to piano when bassist Jay Sprague came on board.” Nils Lofgren’s drummer Bob Berberich replaced Laramie when Lofgren’s first band, Grin, broke up. The Rosslyn Mountain Boys deserve huge credit for helping establish the Birchmere as a regular go-to music venue.



*Tommy Hannum holds first album. Cover photo by Mike Oberman.  
Album design by Dick Bangham.*

*© T. Hannum*

Lead singer Triplett’s celebrity began as a 12-year-old when he played trumpet in his Bethesda, Maryland junior high school band, the Flat Tops, appearing on the local Milt Grant

TV teen show. He's also the vocalist on The Hangmen's popular 1966 hit record, "What a Girl Can't Do." Before the Rosslyn Mountain Boys, Joe, Happy, and Jay were members of DC's "communal band" Claude Jones, regulars around town, and at The Emergency club in Georgetown.

It was booking agent Tom Carrico, later the manager of the Nighthawks and Mary Chapin Carpenter, who first got the Rosslyn Mountain Boys a Birchmere gig. Carrico heard of the music club through Akira Otsuka. Peter Bonta remembers: "It was like stepping back through a time warp to an early '60s honky-tonk bar. Gary had already broken through the wall of the next-door aquarium shop to expand the place. We played every Wednesday for three years. After the show we'd play small stakes poker—sometimes until dawn—with the Birchmere staff, including "Moose" and Don Pricer, another musician. It was a family."

Their first album received nice airplay on local alternative radio station, WHFS, selling over 10,000 copies. One theory of



*(l to r) Tommy Hannum - pedal steel guitar/vocals, Joe Triplett - lead vocals/ rhythm guitar, Bob Berberich - drums/vocals, Barry Foley, bass, Peter Bonta - keyboards/lead guitar/vocals. © Oelze*

why they didn't break big is offered by their first manager, Michael Oberman. He believes that disco music heralded by

the *Saturday Night Fever* album made country music less desirable, the country rock of the RMB included.

However, “promotional timing” is often the excuse for bands that don’t succeed. Gary asserts, “Many good bands don’t make it. Lesser bands do because they have a song. You need a tune like “Mr. Bojangles” or “Gentle on My Mind.” Another problem is they were on the smaller Adelphi records label.”

The Rosslyn Mountain Boys were lured away from the Birchmere by another club and officially disbanded in 1981. But before that happened, Peter Bonta swiped one of the Birchmere’s checkered tablecloths on the last night the band played. He keeps small swatches of that tablecloth in the cases of all of his instruments to this day. The Rosslyn Mountain Boys have occasionally reformed to play outstanding reunion shows at the Birchmere. Gary added the band Yellow Rose to play every Tuesday nights in these early years.

Many thought another early Birchmere favorite, The Star-Spangled Washboard Band, was a local group due to their high popularity in the DC area, especially at the Childe Harold bar in Dupont Circle. In fact, they were an up-and-coming national act from New York. A 1977 *New York Times* profile called them a blend of Earl Scruggs Revue and the Three Stooges. “They spend at least as much time cracking one-liners and running through elaborate skits and sight gags as singing and playing,” wrote *Times* music critic Robert Palmer.

When Gary booked the Star-Spangled Washboard Band, Bill Heard, the eccentric Childe Harold owner, took some offense. “Wild Bill” was already in competition with the Cellar Door booking-up-and-coming acts, and suddenly there was comparable great talent playing at the Birchmere as well.

One evening Heard drove over to the club to check out his new rival. Gary recalls the encounter: “I’d been to his place but had never met him. He sat down next to a couple and soon he was in an argument with them. He hurled a lit candle at the guy, getting hot wax on his leather jacket. I threw him out, but I learned later from other acts that Wild Bill thought the Birchmere was going to be a great success.”



*Autoharpist Hall of Famer Bryan Bowers in 1977. © Oelze*

Autoharpist Bryan Bowers played for both Gary and Wild Bill. “I once asked Bill why he thought the Birchmere would be so successful,” said Bowers. Bill replied, “Because he threw *me* out of his club.”

Bowers played solo shows at the first and second Birchmere locations. He also opened for the club’s later headliners including The Seldom Scene, The Dillards, and The Red Clay Ramblers. He shared memories from his Seattle farm: “From my perception, the Birchmere has always been about the music. It stunned me how great the bluegrass groups were and are.

“I was pretty star-struck back then. I was trying not to step on anybody’s toes. I was astounded that anyone would pay me to play, especially in a “listening” room. If I were in town and wasn’t working, then I’d be at the Birchmere. Gary would welcome me in and would never charge me. I’d stand in the back with a beer watching a show, sharing jokes with Gary.”

# BIRCHMERE

MONDAYS  
Open Mike  
John Longbottom - Host  
TUESDAYS - Yellow Rose  
WED - Rosslyn Mountain Boys

APRIL  
14 & 15  
STAR SPANGLED WASHBOARD BAND  
JOHN LONGBOTTOM  
ONE COVER - TWO SHOWS  
9 Eddie Adcock and Martha II Generation  
2, 29 & 30 Rick Skaggs & Boone Creek  
16, 22, 23, 28 None of the Above  
8 Country Gentlemen  
7 & 21 Seldom Scene  
1 Grass Menagerie  
2723 So. Wakefield St.  
Arlington, Va.  
931-5058

# BIRCHMERE

2723 So. Wakefield St. Arlington, Va. 931-5058

**Mondays - Open Mike with Lynn Eddy**  
**Tuesdays - Al Johnson & the Northstar Band**  
**Wednesdays - Rosslyn Mountain Boys**  
(EXCEPT 12)  
**Now Every Thursday - Seldom Scene**

Sept. 31-Oct. 1 Plum Hollow  
7, 8 Boone Creek *FEATURING RICK SKAGGS*  
12 Fayssox Starling Band  
14, 15 Bill Harrell & The Virginians  
21, 22 Country Gentlemen  
28, 29 Hickory Wind

THE BIRCHMERE is proud to announce the regular Thursday night scheduling of the area's finest bluegrass band, THE SELDOM SCENE.  
We also extend our best wishes to JOHN STARLING, and welcome the newest member of the Scene, PHIL ROSENTHAL.

# BIRCHMERE

2723 So. Wakefield St. Arlington, Va. 931-5058

Mondays - Open Mike with Lynn Eddy  
Tuesdays - Northstar Band  
Wednesdays - Rosslyn Mountain Boys  
Thursdays - Seldom Scene

3,4—STAR SPANGLED WASHBOARD BAND, with Mac Bogert  
10,11—J.D. CROWE AND THE NEW SOUTH  
17,18—LONNIE PEECE AND THE BLUEGRASS ALLIANCE  
24,25—BRYAN BOWERS with Glass Menagerie  
31—NONE OF THE ABOVE  
SUNDAY CONCERTS, 6-10pm, with DICK CERRI  
2 hours live on WHFS  
First week with Seldom Scene and others  
coming: Norman Blake

# BIRCHMERE

2723 So. Wakefield St., Arl. 931-5058.

## FEBRUARY

- 1, 8, 15, 22: YELLOW ROSE  
2, 9, 16, 23: ROSSLYN MT. BOYS  
3, 10: THE GARRIS BROTHERS  
4, 18: COUNTRY GENTLEMEN  
5, 19, 26: NONE OF THE ABOVE  
11: SOUTHGATE  
12, 24: SELDOM SCENE  
17: J. D. CROWE & THE NEW SOUTH  
25: BLUEGRASS CARDINALS

Open Mike Night Mondays 8 p.m.  
JOHN LONGBOTTOM HOST  
No Cover Call for Information

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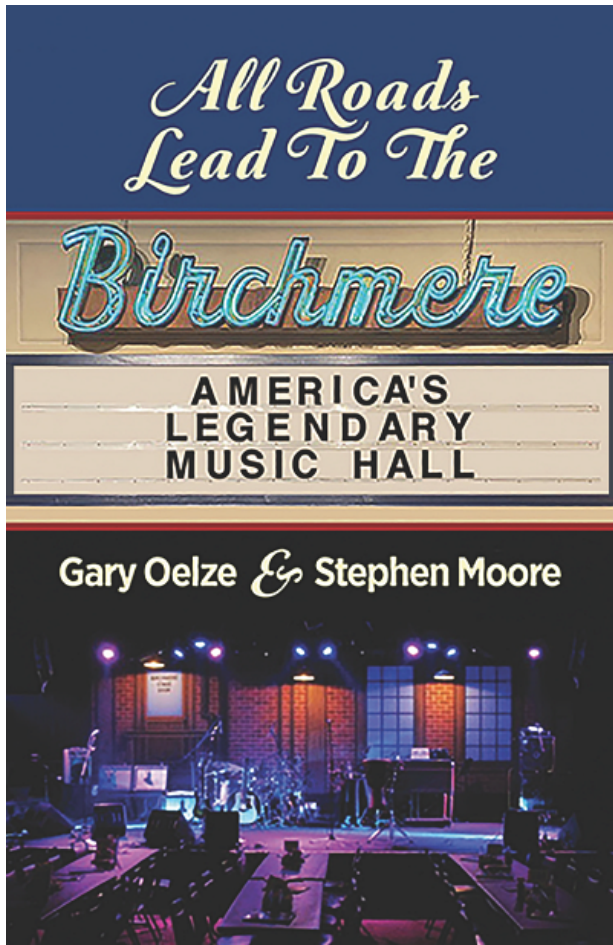
IN MARCH  
Sundays - Noon - Cliff  
Tuesdays - Open Mike  
Wednesdays - ROSSLYN MOUNTAIN BOYS  
Thursdays - SELDOM SCENE

## Weekends

- 2,3—BRYAN BOWERS  
also Phil and Gayle Johnson  
5,10—PETER WORNICK and HOT RIZE  
16—MIKE AULBRIDGE and OLD DOG, with PHIL ROSENTHAL  
17—THE COUNTRY GENTLEMEN  
23,24—EDDIE ADCKOCK, MARTHA & SECOND GENERATION  
also BIG RED FOX (The Top Country Band)  
30,31—BUCK WHITE & THE DOWNSIDE FOLKS  
with Jerry Douglas and Rick Skaggs

1977 and 1978 Unicorn Times newspaper print ads.

Courtesy of Richard Harrington



*The rousing, illustrated story of the Birchmere music hall by founder and operator Gary Oelze with music writer Stephen Moore. Performers, staff, journalists, and patrons share their stories of bluegrass, folk, blues, jazz, r&b, and more.*

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