

CAP HISTORY: THE EVOLUTION OF A ROCK PALACE

BY STEPHANIE SUSNJARA

March 15, 2019. It's a Friday night in Port Chester and a giddy throng is clustered outside the doors of The Capitol Theatre. An electrifying buzz surges through the swarm of concertgoers as they wait beneath the marquee, anxious to get inside and help Phil Lesh, The Cap's beloved artist-in-residence, ring in his 79th year with a sold-out performance that includes a stellar cast of musician friends: keyboardist Benmont Tench, drummer John Molo, and guitarists Grahame Lesh, Jackie Greene and John Scofield.

The crowd makes its way through the heavy brass doors where ushers wearing tie-dyed T-shirts slap floor-access wristbands onto extended arms. Once inside the grand inner lobby, some of the patrons take a moment to gaze around. They marvel at the crystal chandeliers dangling high above their heads, the sprawling white marble staircase leading to the mezzanine, and the walls made rich with a royal rock-and-roll palette of red, black and gold.

This undulating mass continues to enter the venue. Smiles flash and bodies lock in tight, love-radiating hugs as fans greet not just each other, but also ushers, security guards and other Cap staffers.

"My favorite audiences are the Phil Lesh audiences," says head usher Brian Lynch. "We have so many repeat customers at these shows, and it always feels like a family event."

Family. It's a word that pops up frequently at The Capitol Theatre. Ever since owner Peter Shapiro reopened the venue in 2012, it has become a second home for a community of live music lovers who are as dedicated to the room as they are to the artists onstage.

Beyond its regulars, "The Cap" draws crowds from all over the tri-state area.

"The Cap is a regional East Coast venue," says Shapiro. "That said, we can have people representing up to 30 states during a Phil Lesh run. Fans have even nicknamed the nearby Hilton Hotel 'the Phil-ton' whenever Phil's in town. I myself always loved travelling to shows—there's a certain magic surrounding a road trip that becomes part of the broader live-music adventure."

Tonight marks the fifth birthday celebration at The Cap for Lesh, the legendary bassist who first played here with the Grateful Dead on March 20, 1970. Janis Joplin, Derek and the Dominos, Van Morrison, Traffic and Santana, among others, played during this Golden Age—part of an unparalleled list of rock acts that sends shivers down the spines of those of us who long to have been part of this scene, arguably rock's most influential period. But before we dig into that storied time which helped create the hallowed ground on which The Cap rests, we have to go back to the beginning.

The Capitol Theatre was built at the tail end of vaudeville and the blossoming of the silver screen. This era witnessed an explosion in movie palaces, which popped up across every major city and on every main street in America. The Cap's architect Thomas Lamb, a master of movie-palace design, was said to have built 300 of these halls worldwide.

Like rock concerts and other forms of contemporary entertainment, both vaudeville and cinema offered a welcome escape from everyday life, transporting folks to a different time and place. Grand movie palaces were designed to enhance this experience by making everyone feel as if they had stepped into a fairytale and become royalty. Audiences in the opulent Roaring Twenties especially begged to be swept away by fantasy not just on the screen, but also in their overall entertainment experience.

Lamb's Capitol Theatre represents a mash-up of architectural details including classical, baroque, Art Nouveau and Art Deco. The theater's handsome exterior reflects the Italian Renaissance period with its buff-faced façade, rows of Romanesque semi-circular arches framing the windows, and a decorative terra cotta cornice. Its inner lobby boasts flourishes inspired by Byzantine design: glass mirrors with pilastered frames; walls decorated with fluted columns; and stylized capitals featuring squirrels holding acorns, a motif that's become a treasured symbol in The Cap's legacy. This bushy-tailed image, which appears on 224 reliefs throughout the theater, has leapt off the walls and onto employee T-shirts and various merch. Cap marketing volunteers, aka the Street Team, are fondly referred to as the Squirrel Squad.

On August 18, 1926, The Capitol Theatre opened under private ownership. Two hundred people anxious to attend the grand opening were turned away at the box office on that late-summer evening. People from all over the county had come to see the new theater, touted by the local newspaper as being one of the finest in the country, and for having "the only theater refrigerating system"—designed by theater air-conditioning pioneer Frederick Wittenmeier—in Westchester.

Uniformed staff ushered in two-thousand ticketholders who must have held their breath when they entered the theater's wide auditorium. They would have marveled at the three-tiered side-wall boxes embellished with designed niches, draped

arches and the impressive 51-foot-wide ceiling dome before settling into their maroon leather seats with plush velour backings.

A ten-piece orchestra kicked off the evening with "The Star-Spangled Banner," and a local show business family in the audience belted out a ditty: "The Capitol," written just for the theater. A village official gave a speech followed by five acts of vaudeville—a comic, a juggling-and-dance act, a vocal trio, a humorous skit and a dance performance accompanied by a Filipino string orchestra. In keeping with the traditional program of the era, movies screened after the live acts: an "Our Gang" comedy followed by "The Sea Wolf" based on the Jack London novel.

During its playhouse days, Mae West, Al Jolson, Jack Benny, Blackstone the Magician and other vaudeville icons now permanently etched into the psyche of American pop culture graced The Cap's stage. In 1929 the theater was acquired by William Fox. After his bankruptcy, management shifted toward Skouras Theatre Corp. Vaudeville embarked on a steady decline as celluloid entertainment took over, and the theater dropped the "5 Acts of High Class Vaudeville" from its standard bill.

By 1930 over 65 percent of the American public went to the movies on a weekly basis. The Capitol Theatre kept its luster throughout Hollywood's Golden Age, screening classics such as "Gone with the Wind" and "Casablanca." Back then two films were typically shown a night, along with a newsreel and cartoon. A ticket cost a quarter before 6 pm and 40 cents thereafter.

Like other movie palaces, The Capitol began to lose its allure post-World War II as the public gravitated toward a new favorite pastime—hunkering down in front of the TV. Despite declining ticket prices and competition from other movie theatres, The Cap hung on through the next couple decades.

In April of 1968, the Skouras Theatre Corp. sold The Cap to regional movie-chain owner Philip Steinberg. To keep profits up, Steinberg dabbled in screening adult films during the spring of 1969. This brief chapter, which was de rigueur for the freewheeling times, ended shortly after the district attorney raided the theater and charged Steinberg with promoting obscenity.

Dennis Bochichio, who began working part-time at The Cap in 1968, doing whatever needed to get done—changing the marquee, working the candy stand, cleaning on weekends—says, "Actually it was an interesting time—the summer of 1968 through 1969. Steinberg was trying to figure out a way to do something new to reinvent The Capitol Theatre."

Enter rock promoter Howard Stein, who leased the theater from



Peter Shapiro and Marvin Ravikoff

Steinberg in July 1970. Stein was an important rock promoter on the New York scene who in the late Sixties was busy booking bands at two particular venues in Flushing, Queens: The Singer Bowl and The State Pavilion. Before taking over The Cap, Stein was promoting many of the day's top artists: The Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, The Who, Steppenwolf and more.

By leasing The Cap, which was 32 miles from Manhattan, Stein was able to continue booking the same upper-echelon rock bands that were tearing up the stage at the Fillmore East. Owned by the legendary promoter Bill Graham, this Medieval Revival-style theater located in the East Village had opened in March 1968 and served as the epicenter of the New York rock scene.

On February 6, 1970, Howard Stein presented the Chambers Brothers and NRBO at The Cap.

"I remember being outside and listening to the Chambers Brothers rip the roof off the house," says Ken Lee, who along with his wife Judy, then both in their early 20s, worked as ushers in The Cap's mezzanine. "I thought, this is just too good to be just for now. We need to preserve this."

With permission from Howard Stein, the couple began recording shows. The taping setup consisted of a Sony TC-124S portable stereo recorder they set up in the middle of the first row of the mezzanine, with two sets of Sony stereo microphones strung 15 feet apart.

"The Cap was a great space to record as it was made for sound," says Ken Lee. "It's round, has a good echo, and everything in it sounds great."



The Lees recorded essentially all of the 100-plus shows that took place at The Cap in 1970 and 1971, including the 18 historic Grateful Dead shows played during what is considered the band's most prolific period.

Judy Lee remembers sometimes running a projector in the balcony. "Bugs Bunny" and other eight-millimeter films of Looney Tunes cartoons would be projected during set breaks and equipment changeouts.

These were still the early days of rock and roll, and everyone was still trying to figure it out, promoters included. Bochichio, whose jack-of-all-trades role had expanded to include head electrician, remembers, "Howard Stein was really ahead of his time. He had a lighting system and a house sound system installed, which was pretty uncommon back then."

According to Bochichio, when he came to The Cap in 1968, the only stage lighting consisted of border lights and footlights on the stage. When the first concerts started up in early 1970, the original truss lighting consisted of a window washer's scaffold that hung from the ceiling in front of the stage. There were no electronic dimmer boards, and the amplifiers relied on vacuum tubes.

Still, The Cap stood out compared to other venues, as noted by the Grateful Dead's lead guitarist Jerry Garcia, who loved the room: "See, there's only two theaters, man...that are set up pretty groovy all around for music and for smooth stage changes, good lighting and all that—the Fillmore and The Capitol Theatre. And those are the only two in the whole country."

It's hard to imagine now, but when Pink Floyd played The Cap on April 22, 1970, the audience was so sparse that bassist Roger Waters implored those sitting in the balcony to come to the floor so the band could play to a crowdlike atmosphere.

The scene was spontaneous and felt as if anything could happen. On August 8, 1970, Janis Joplin sat in Vahson's, a bar down the street from The Cap, catching a few drinks before she was to perform that night. During an impromptu poetry jam with her songwriter friend Bob Neuwirth, she wrote the now-famous song "Mercedes Benz." An hour later she took to the stage and sang an Acapella version of the tune.

"Janis had become a friend and was a very nice person," says Ken Lee. "Fame wasn't like it is now—it didn't build walls."

"It was a nice casual atmosphere," adds Judy Lee. "I think the artists were just happy to find other counterculture people who were like-minded since so much of the establishment still wasn't receptive."

Back then the selling of alcohol was prohibited and profit-earning relied solely on ticket sales. Acts typically played two shows each night, one at 7:30 pm and one at 11 pm. On May 9, 1970, two shows

featuring Joe Cocker and his band, Mad Dogs and Englishmen, were to take place at the usual times. But due to technical issues, the early show started at 9 pm and the late show didn't get going until 1:30 pm. The band wound up playing to a captive audience until 5am. Afterward two thousand people flooded onto Westchester Avenue in the dawn light.

On June 27, 1971, Bill Graham shuttered the Fillmore East. Stein took this as a cue to return to New York City. One month later, he left The Cap for another aging movie house, The American Academy of Music (later the Palladium), located on 14th Street where he would continue promoting groundbreaking artists such as the New York Dolls, Roxy Music and Lou Reed

While the Stein era lasted only 18 months (February 1970 through July 1971), it secured The Cap as an iconic venue that ran neck and neck with the venerable Fillmore East, presenting bands that will forever live in the rock-and-roll lexicon.

A few promoters worked The Cap following Stein, including Eddie Claridge, who ran the theater from August 1973 until July 1975. During Claridge's tenure, bookings became more challenging as many of the supergroups who had come through earlier were now playing arenas. Still, great acts took the stage: Bonnie Raitt, E.L.O., Hot Tuna, B.B. King, Frank Zappa, Harry Chapin....

"The Cap has always been a special place," says Claridge, who is now a devoted regular. "The venue is wide without obstructions and has great sight lines. Ever since the orchestra pit was removed in the late Sixties, the audience has been able to get up very close to the stage. This allows for energy to flow back and forth freely between the artists and the audience, creating a powerful connection between the two."

In 1976 a city ordinance was issued banning live music after 1 am. Philip Steinberg passed away in 1977 and The Cap went dark, entering a state of decay. The venue seemed destined for demolition, a fate suffered by most of its movie-palace brethren.

Then in 1982 Marvin Ravikoff, a local developer with a background in historic preservation, purchased the building and began a renovation process that would breathe new life into the auditorium.

"It was a derelict building, all boarded up," says Ravikoff. "When I opened the backstage door, I was greeted by a lake of water with plastic cups bobbing about. There were enough pigeons holed up inside to make Central Park look as if it didn't have a pigeon occupancy."

The building had no windows nor proper electrical wiring when Ravikoff took over. Pipes had burst and the water that had flooded the stage had to be pumped out. The crumbling plaster dome was riddled with holes and open to the heavens.

Ravikoff spent large sums slowly restoring the theater to its initial 1920s splendor. In 1984 The Cap was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

To make The Cap profitable again, Ravikoff experimented. He rented the hall out for theatrical productions, boxing matches and ballroom dancing. Rock acts were booked occasionally, including the Ramones, Metallica, Phish and Blues Traveler.

In 1997 David Bowie and The Rolling Stones played shows at The Capitol to an invitation-only audience, part of an MTV series called "Live from the 10 Spot." Artists such as Bob Dylan as well as Simon and Garfunkel occasionally rented the theater

out for rehearsals.

But music was not the main focus during this period, and Ravikoff shifted bookings more and more toward catering and special events. Parties ranging from bar mitzvahs to weddings to political fundraisers to corporate extravaganzas took place.

In 2010 the well-established promoter and Brooklyn Bowl owner Peter Shapiro approached Ravikoff with a proposal to sign a long-term lease to revive The Cap as a rock hall. For Ravikoff, the theater was his baby whom he had painstakingly nursed back to health. He was reluctant to hand it over easily to just anyone. Yet Shapiro was persistent.

"I was committed to bringing The Cap back and believed in it," says Shapiro. "Theaters such as this masterpiece built by Thomas Lamb just didn't exist anymore. I knew The Cap had great bones—it just needed new skin to be brought back as a rock palace."

Ravikoff was struck by Shapiro's passion, and after two years of negotiating they struck a deal.

Shapiro had a distinct vision for The Cap. In 1997 at the age of 23, he had cut his teeth as a club owner when he took over Wetlands Preserve. This Lower Manhattan rock club situated at 161 Hudson Street reigned for a decade as the largest venue in New York to host live music seven days a week. Its legacy includes booking emerging jam bands and more—The Spin Doctors, Oasis, Pearl Jam, Dave Matthews Band, Phish and even Maroon 5. Wetlands is perhaps best remembered for its incredibly warm and friendly vibe, which Shapiro was driven to recreate at The Cap.

"Pete cares about the fan experience; you might even say that he is obsessed with it," says former general manager Tom Bailey, whose tenure dated from the start of the Shapiro era. "For Pete the 'vibe' is key, and a lot of time and effort goes into making that vibe right at every show."

Shapiro's vision also included highlighting the original beauty of the space, and re-outfitting it with a two-million-dollar renovation.

The mandate was to blow out all the stops and bring in the best technological advancements to create a new standard in music venues. This included the installation of one of the best sound systems in the country and an arena-size lighting system.

"I'm a visual guy and have always loved the integration of live music and video," says Shapiro, who studied cinema at Northwestern University and has produced numerous films including "U2 3D" and "All Access: Front Row. Backstage. Live!"

"From day one I saw the visual potential of The Cap with its rounded, planetarium surface, a feature that similar-size venues simply do not

have," says Shapiro. "I could see how the walls could come alive with moving images and other visuals."

With this in mind, ten high-definition projectors were added so live projections could be splashed across the ceiling dome and upper side walls, a 21st-century nod to the mind-blowing psychedelic light shows associated with the late Sixties and early Seventies.

"Peter, God bless him with his talent in the music business," says Ravikoff. "He really brought us over the bar in every way."

The Cap technological revamp also included installing a highly sophisticated in-house video production system that relies on a 10-camera shoot involving robotic cameras.

"Since we opened, we've been doing something that is a priority in the digital landscape and helping to pioneer it," says Jonathan Healey, vice president of marketing and digital strategy at Dayglo Ventures, Shapiro's parent company. "The livestream functions as a spyglass into what's happening at a show, providing a visual narrative of the music. It's also the final component in the tech advancements at The Cap. I mean, how many other venues in the country, if any, are doing live projection mapping on the walls, elite sound and outputting 10-camera livestreams all at the same time?"

On September 4, 2012, The Capitol Theatre partnered with concert promoter The Bowery Presents and officially reopened with Bob Dylan christening the stage. Fans came from all across the country and stood outside in the rain, waiting to see the legendary artist play the legendary venue. Three months later, Shapiro purchased the theater from Ravikoff.

On April 3, 2013 The Cap rolled out its lobby bar, Garcia's, named after the guitarist whose spirit permeates every inch of the venue. Jerry Garcia's daughter Trixie was there on opening night.

"We chose to launch this idea at The Capitol because of its long and illustrious history with the Grateful Dead and the jam scene," she said.

Open seven days a week, Garcia's has become a popular hub for local and touring bands. Emerging acts such as Twiddle, the Revivalists and the Marcus King Band all played Garcia's before they graduated on to play the 1835-capacity big room.

In June 2017, almost five years after its opening, Bob Dylan returned for a three-night run, marking The Cap's 500th show. Since then, almost a million people have visited the theater.

While The Cap has a strong reputation as an important stomping ground for jam bands, it continues to host a diversity of acts ranging from the Strokes to the Avett Brothers to Slayer. Comedians including "Weird Al" Yankovic and Amy Schumer have played the theater as well.

"We have witnessed customers crying in joy at seeing their favorite artists," says head usher Brian Lynch. "We have seen entire audiences on their feet with ear-to-ear grins singing along to every song at the shows they are attending. We see the audience leaving the theater covered in sweat and glowing after having the time of their lives."

The second set is about to begin and the crowd stands at rapt attention as Shapiro presents Phil Lesh with a three-tiered birthday cake decorated with Grateful Dead imagery: "steal your faces," dancing bears and a ring of red roses. The two share a bear hug after Shapiro remarks on how tonight is not just Phil's 79th birthday but also his 79th show at The Cap since its reopening. The audience roars and the band breaks into "Playing in the Band," a song that the Grateful Dead debuted at The Cap on February 18, 1971, along with "Bertha," "Greatest Story Ever Told," "Loser" and "Wharf Rat."

Shapiro attended his first Grateful Dead concert at the Rosemont Horizon (now the Allstate Arena) outside Chicago in 1993, and immediately became a full-on Deadhead. He immersed himself in the scene and made a documentary about it: "And Miles to Go, On Tour with The Grateful Dead." The Lesh residency at The Cap signifies how Shapiro's career has come full circle.

"It's not easy to put on concerts," says Shapiro. "To do it well, you really have to live it. You need to be a fan yourself and then you can feel out what direction to head in."

Shapiro has described his first Dead show as "life-altering." The spirit of that transcendental moment lives at every Cap show, according to marketing director Stefanie May. "People have told me that The Cap saved their life," she says. "People even call The Cap 'church'."

The comparison makes perfect sense. Music exists in liturgical services to lift the soul. Live music in secular settings has been having the same effect since minstrels wandered from town to town. The Cap's glorious space, the family dynamic between patrons and staff, the moment when the dancing tribe becomes one with the band beneath the celestial dome 65 feet above—awash with a projection of twinkling lights—this is what Shapiro was after.

When devout Cap attendees tell Shapiro "we were there" back in the Wetlands days, he beams and often says, "We're keeping it going."

That "it" is The Cap's mystical vibe that restores our spirits and reverberates in our hearts. Like those who visited the theater in the Roaring Twenties to be regaled by performers on the stage and screen, we also long to be transported out of the ordinary and into the extraordinary.

"It's a 360-degree immersion," says Shapiro. "From the moment you walk in, you feel the history—that matters. You grab a drink and interact with the staff,—that matters. You experience the sound, the lights, the visuals—all that matters. Everything—even the air—matters, period."

Is The Cap still making history now?

"Of course it is!" says Bailey. "Every great show in a great venue will live on forever in the minds of those who attended it."

