

# Seattle Met

## Crash Course: A Century of Seattle Music

From prohibition jazz to garage rock in a castle to hip-hop's new guard.

By [Stefan Milne](#) 11/20/2018 at 9:00am Published in the [December 2018](#) issue of *Seattle Met*

1918-1933

### Menace to Civilization

Drop the needle on the last century of Seattle music and you'll hear, at first, silence. You can still go to Washington Hall, a venue at 14th and Fir Street. You can see the stage haloed by lights and the wood dance floor, all original and restored, but the band itself—in photo and recording—is gone. On June 10, 1918, Miss Lillian Smith's Jazz Band played the first concert identified as jazz in the city, at an NAACP fundraiser. Smith was a piano player, and the band, presumably black, gigged for a couple years, but that's all we know.

When national prohibition started in 1920, jazz and liquor—even narcotics—were immediately conflated. In 1921 the *Seattle Daily Times* ran a series of articles on the new music. They first asked, "Is Jazz Menace to Civilization? Worse than Booze, Say Club Women." The day's next headline read, "Jazz, Like Music of the Savage, Harms Nervous System, Says Doctor."

Unsurprisingly, much of Seattle's early jazz went unrecorded. Even music by **Oscar William Holden**, the most revered musician on the scene, a pianist as adept at playing stride as playing Chopin, has been lost.

By the mid-1920s Jackson Street, from First Avenue to 14th, was packed with speakeasy clubs that the feds couldn't squelch. Despite illegal connotations, by 1928 musicians who refused to play jazz found it tough to get work, and white musicians were translating the music to theaters and, in the case of Vic Meyers—one of the most comprehensively recorded early Seattle jazz

musicians—to boozy downtown dance halls like the Rose Room. That didn't dampen backlash. Critics still thought the music (so danceable!) held listeners in a narcotic sway. In December 1933, a couple weeks after prohibition ended, a bill was introduced in Washington State Legislature. It would've condemned "all persons convicted of being jazzily intoxicated" to insane asylums.

**1921**

## **Symphony Saviors**

The Seattle Symphony debuted in 1908 but floundered after the 1920 recession. Enter Madame Mary Davenport Engberg, a violin virtuoso who led the Seattle Civic Symphony (an interim amateur orchestra) and who was considered the only female conductor in the world. The SCS garnered praise for three years. But when Engberg scolded an oboist for a mistake and he purported that she slapped him, the symphony died. Cecilia Schultz, a local concert promoter, stepped in and petitioned the Local 76 musician's union. On November 8, 1926, the new orchestra tore into Tchaikovsky's Sixth.

**1938**

## **The Luck Ngi Musical Society**

Even though Chinese and Japanese Americans far outnumbered African Americans in 1920s and 1930s Seattle, traditional Asian music styles didn't find jazz's boozy crossover audiences. In 1938, though, the Luck Ngi Musical Society formed a revered Cantonese opera company. It saw its heyday in the late '30s—amid splashing cymbals and cigarette smoke—but celebrated its 80th anniversary this September.

**1946**

## **Swing and Bop**

### **The Scene That Gave Us Quincy Jones, Ernestine Anderson, Ray Charles**

You slip down a staircase on Maynard. You pass a bouncer named Gorilla Jones, an ex-middleweight with a white carnation perhaps pinned to his lapel, and enter Basin Street. A mixed-race crowd 200 strong packs the speakeasy and on the stage is a velvet-voiced 17-year-old. Now she's mimicking bebop singer Sarah Vaughan and working the room for tips, but later in her career Ernestine Anderson will warrant mentions alongside Vaughan and Billie Holiday.

In the 1940s—when the city’s African American population grew from 3,700 to 15,600—Seattle jazz hit its golden age, drawing the country’s stars for shows (Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald) and fomenting some luminaries of its own. In 1948 local trumpet player Leon Vaughn counted 34 nightclubs along Jackson. The street was a nightly Mardi Gras of booze, drugs, gambling, prostitution, swing, and bop—apparently quite safe and racially peaceful for its day.

In this scene Anderson, Quincy Jones, Ray Charles, and pianist Patti Bown—all teenagers at the time, gigging in clubs—came of age. Jones played his first show as a trumpeter with Oscar Holden, Jr. and Grace Holden—children of the ’20s jazz legend—at the YMCA when he was 14. The next year he met Charles, a gifted 16-year-old who’d just moved here from Florida. The two formed a friendship that later spawned records like *The Genius of Ray Charles*.

All four musicians left the city within a few years (Seattle was no place to make it big). By the early 1960s the Jackson Street joints closed, due in part to hard liquor legalization (1949) and a desegregating society. But Anderson returned to Seattle in the mid-1970s and continued to release albums until 2011, even a couple of 1990s releases on her friend Jones’s label.

**1954**

## **Our First Major Maestro**

The yellow Corvette roared up to the Opera House. You knew Seattle Symphony’s conductor had arrived. As much rock star as maestro, **Milton Katims** was a world-class violist with a baton-snapping temper. After taking over in 1954, he elevated the Seattle Symphony towards international renown, even getting Igor Stravinsky to conduct his *Firebird* suite here in 1962. Seattle loved Katims for it, even putting his portrait on the cover of the phone book.

**1952–1964**

## **Cafe Folk**

By 1952 a folk revival was taking root in Seattle. At the Chalet, a U District coffee shop, folk singer Walt Robertson, with his chinstrap beard and firm voice, sang homage to the region in songs like “Puget Sound” collected on his *American Northwest Ballads*. A few years later, in 1958, Seattle’s first espresso cafes opened. The Place Next Door (beside Wallingford’s Guild 45th Theatre) had a distressed brick interior that evoked an underground French joint, and there local singer Alice Stuart honed her folk blues before moving on to play alongside Mississippi John Hurt and Joan Baez.

1957

## Bonnie Guitar

When Bonnie Guitar (Seattle-born Bonnie Buckingham) heard Ned Miller's "Dark Moon," she was so entranced that she ceded all royalties for the opportunity to record it. Her version—a silvery pop nocturne—flew to six on the charts. The next year she signed on as vice president of the new Seattle label Dolton Records and turned her keen ear to production, yielding the region's first major hits: the Frantics' garage romp "Werewolf" and the Fleetwoods' "Come Softly to Me" and "Mr. Blue," a pair of glossy doo-wop songs that were first—and remain some of the only—number one Northwest singles on the Billboard Hot 100.

1957

## Dave Lewis Combo

Dave Lewis (a black kid too young to enter due to liquor laws) liked to sneak in through the stage door of Birdland Supper Club to catch major R&B acts—Solomon Burke, James Brown. Birdland sat just below the redline that separated the predominantly black Central District and the white neighborhoods to the north. Lewis gigged around the city with R&B groups until 1957, when Birdland began all ages shows and his Dave Lewis Combo became the club's house band, playing to packed multiracial rooms and likely becoming the first local band to play a little-known single called "Louie Louie."

1961

## Louie Louie Oh No

In 1955, Richard Berry—a black LA doo-wop singer—was backstage, listening to the Rhythm Rockers playing "El Loco Cha Cha." He dug the riff so much he filched it and jotted "Louie Louie" on a piece of toilet paper. The lyrics approximated the Jamaican argot trendy in tiki's heyday. Released as a B-side, it made its way eventually into the hands of Bob "Bop" Summerise, a black Tacoma DJ, who helped it become a modest jukebox hit in the city. Then Dave Lewis played it at Birdland. Then **the Fabulous Wailers**, a white Tacoma rock and roll band, turned the vocal progression—*dun-dun-dun, dun-dun, dun-dun-dun*—into a garage riff, and in 1961 their record made it to influential DJ Pat O'Day, who made it a regional staple.

In 1963, a group of Portland high school students recorded the song after hearing it on a jukebox.

The Kingsmen's version is a hot mess, a first take sung through braces into a poorly placed mic, aping the Fabulous Wailers. The Kingsmen broke up. Their promoter, however, kept pushing the single and it caught on along the East Coast, rising to number two on the Billboard charts.

Incensed by the wild sound and lyrics he presumed prurient ("so filthy I cannot enclose them"), a father wrote to attorney general Robert Kennedy. An FBI investigation ensued, during which investigators tried to suss out the filth in the gabbled vocal. One guess read, "Every night and day / I play with my thing / fuck your girl / all kinds of ways." After two years, the bureau declared the track "unintelligible," thus not obscene.

But controversy is potent hype. The song sold millions of copies and lodged in the rock canon. The Sonics, the Kinks, the Beach Boys, Black Flag—all have contributed to what has become one of the most recorded songs ever. And Washington fans can't let go of its appropriated origins. In 1985, a group in Bellingham campaigned to make it the state song. Another called the LLAMAS (The Louie Louie Advocacy and Music Appreciation Society) revived the push in 2007. The first question in their website's FAQ reads, "Is this a joke?"

"No."

**1960–1968**

## **Jimi Hendrix at the Castle**

A teenage Jimi Hendrix hung around, recalled DJ Pat O'Day, waiting for a band like the Statics to blow an amp. That was common enough at **the Spanish Castle Ballroom**, the region's premier venue, given the area's signature sound: cheap amps cranked, sometimes stuck with toothpicks for maximum scorch. When a busted amp couldn't be patched with a chewing gum wrapper, Hendrix would offer his own rig along with his guitar skills. That—and his smalltime bands like the Velvetones—were the extent of his local music career. He was arrested for riding in a stolen car (by the Seattle Police Department, members of which held views like "all Negroes carry knives") and joined the army in 1961 to suspend his two-year sentence.

The Spanish Castle, with its stucco towers and parapets ignited in neon, had opened off Highway 99 halfway between Tacoma and Seattle in 1931 to dodge both cities' prohibition snitches and restrictions on public dancing. Initially a jazz joint, its attendance peaked during WWII, but the venue's historical significance culminated after.

In 1959 O'Day booked the Fabulous Wailers—fresh off the Top-10 hit “Tall Cool One” and a spot on Dick Clark—to play the Castle on a Friday, and the venue found its second life, pulling crowds for local bands like the Dynamics, the Frantics, and the Sonics. “That was the epitome of the place to play,” says Sonics sax player Rob Lind. “A sea of faces... You’d go home and be so excited you couldn’t sleep.”

The Castle’s dominion, though, soon ended. In 1966, three teens were hit by a car out front, and the venue was leveled in 1968. But a year before, Hendrix recorded “Spanish Castle Magic,” a psychedelic paean that takes the region’s overdriven blues and kicks them—as was his way—into the cosmos.

**1964**

## **Sonically Radical, Lyrically Less So**

The Sonics’ dirty sound, all overdrive and raw yowl, is that of this region. But have you read their lyrics lately? Punk geeks get breathless citing those, too: Witches! Psychos! Satan! According to Rob Lind, people weren’t really listening to songs like “The Witch,” written by Gerry Roslie. “They thought it was about witches and devils and evil. Really, it was Gerry’s thing about women being mean to their boyfriends.” As it happens, most “evil” Sonics songs—“The Witch,” “Psycho,” “He’s Waitin’”—took boilerplate, girls-are-mean sexism and garnished with occult hyperbole.

**1965–1975**

## **Funky Broadway**

In 2000 or so, a London DJ exhumed a 45 called “Little Love Affair.” This “Northern Soul” single, as the DJs called it, was soon fetching \$1,500, \$3,500 even. Its singer, Patrinell Staten, had been a rising Seattle soul star in the late ’60s and had belted at Jimi Hendrix’s funeral.

From 1965 through 1975, funk and soul wailed until 4am at local venues like the Black and Tan Club and the Golden Crown, a bar above a Chinese restaurant on Jackson. Bands like the Black on White Affair, Robbie Hill’s Family Affair, and **Cold, Bold, and Together** topped charts at KYAC, the Central District’s soul station, beating national singles like Marvin Gaye’s “Trouble Man.” Quincy Jones’s brother, Lloyd Jones, a KYAC DJ, even pushed a Black on White Affair record into the hands of his famous brother, though little came of it.

While Quincy and his swing ilk found national fame, Seattle's soul stars weren't so fortunate. Disco signaled the genre's death knell, and the Central District scene faded. Its players either left the city or took jobs as teachers or returned, as in Staten's case, to the church choir. It wasn't until 2004 that some other crate-diggers—local DJ Mr. Supreme and Seattle's Light in the Attic record label—collected enough pieces to release a compilation called *Wheedle's Groove*.

Absurdly—and in a pattern repeated from Vic Meyers to Macklemore—Seattle soul did produce one household name, the saxophonist from Cold, Bold, and Together, a white guy who'd barely made the band: Kenny G.

**1970–1976**

## **Tupperware Whiz Kidz**

After hanging around punk club CBGB's in New York, Tomata du Plenty returned to Seattle and formed a band. When first here, du Plenty had been part of Ze Whiz Kidz—a gay glam drag performance art troupe that'd scandalized local audiences. On May 1, 1976, only nine days after the Ramones' first album dropped, du Plenty and his new band, the Tupperwares, held the inaugural Seattle punk concert, likely the first on the West Coast. The Meyce and the Telepaths rounded out the bill at the “TMT Show” in Capitol Hill's Oddfellows Building. The Tupperwares played only a few more shows in Seattle before decamping to LA and changing their name to the Screemers.

**1972**

## **Native Music Revival**

In 1900, a King County census found only 22 Native residents, and for the 60 years that followed Duwamish and Salish music was not performed in this area publicly. After WWII, Native populations rebounded, up to 7,391 in 1970. In 1972, a pair of folk music enthusiasts inaugurated Northwest Folklife—the city's annual free music festival. Then laws like the Boldt Decision—a ruling that half of the annual Washington fish catch belonged to tribes—fostered cultural pride. “After that,” James Rasmussen, a Duwamish tribe member and musician, said in *Before Seattle Rocked*, “we started having drum circles and sings.” Those traditions have carried over to contemporary bands like Khu.éex', who blend funk and rock with Northwest Native storytelling.

**1975**

## Opera Ringers

Glynn Ross “sells opera the way Madison Avenue sells beer,” wrote *The New York Times*. By 1970, seven years into its run, the Seattle Opera’s founding director already had skywriters and bumper stickers touting the art form: *Opera Lives!* In 1975, though, he wanted grandeur. He wanted *The Ring of the Nibelungs*, Richard Wagner’s four-part, hardly performed opera cycle—cut from the same Norse cloth as Tolkien’s epic and totaling some 15 hours replete with dragons, gods, and magical titular jewelry. People figured it’d bankrupt the little company. But *The Ring* sold out its first performances, culled international attention, and became a regional signature, performed yearly for a decade and intermittently thereafter (last in 2013), drawing aficionado respect and crowds of “Ringheads.”

1977

## Heart Battles the Creeps

“Heart’s Wilson Sisters Confess: ‘It Was Only Our First Time!’” read the caption below a picture of bare-shouldered Ann and Nancy Wilson. Their label, Mushroom Records, ran the ad in the *National Informer*. The Bellevue-born sisters—who fronted Heart, then the country’s most popular female-fronted hard rock band—were livid at the incestuous insinuation. In *Heart: In the Studio*, Ann recounts the fight to get the ad removed: “‘Pull this stuff back,’ we said. ‘Shut up and tour,’ they said.... While none of the men around seemed to mind, we *really* minded.” The sisters signed to CBS records. Mushroom went to court, hoping to keep the band from finishing its next album. In 1977, a promoter got into Ann’s dressing room and, having seen the creepy ad, asked where her lover was. She penned “Barracuda,” an indictment of “how sleazy the record business was.” Heart recorded it in a Westlake studio, and it became one of their biggest hits. In 2008, when Sarah “Barracuda” Palin wanted it as soundtrack at the RNC, Nancy Wilson shot back: “Sarah Palin’s views and values in no way represent us as American women.”

1984–1987

## The True Delights of Our Two Kennys

Yes, **Kenny G** and **Kenny Loggins** (an Everett native) are punchlines, appropriating black genres and achieving the final steps in their de-evolutions: elevator jazz, yacht rock. But try turning on their 1980s hits—“Footloose,” “Danger Zone,” and “Songbird,” all three of which cracked the Billboard top five—and not feeling the distillation of an emotion too rare: delight. You may grin so intensely you feel it in your spinal cord. You may feel the impulse—previously



unknown to you—to raise an appreciative hand. You may find yourself suddenly on a moonstruck beach, your barely buttoned shirt fluttering with wind. Mr. G is not John Coltrane. The powers of “Songbird” are not transcendent. But they are—in a quality perhaps corollary to delight—ontological: If we’re honest, how many of us may not exist without that sax?

**1980S**

## **Backwater Punk**

Who started regional punk? The Sonics in 1964? The Tupperwares in 1976? Sure, but our most enduring and significant “first” punk band is the Fastbacks, which formed in 1979. The quartet of Kim Warnick, Lulu Gargiulo, Kurt Bloch, and an ever-rotating drummer (for a time Duff McKagan) played excellent, eminently catchy pop punk for over 20 years, though never achieved great fame.

By the early 1980s Washington Hall and the Showbox were tour stops for major hardcore bands like Black Flag and Dead Kennedys—moshing bodies ricocheted, Iggy Pop ripped his shirt off—and local acts followed. The Fartz forged charging hardcore. The U-Men blended post-punk angularity with metal gloom. Green River and Malfunkshun and Melvins joined the fray, and by 1986 Seattle had enough of a scene to put together a locally popular, nationally insignificant compilation called *Deep Six*—a harbinger of the city’s ultimate scene.

**1985**

## **Symphony Reunions**

This September the Seattle Symphony won *Gramophone* magazine’s inaugural Orchestra of the Year award, beating out European heavyweights like Vienna and London. It did so on the strength of recordings from its independent record label, Seattle Symphony Media, started in 2014. But the groundwork for that success started in 1985, when our orchestra left the American Federation of Musicians to form the International Guild of Symphony, Opera, and Ballet Musicians. This break with the AFM gave Seattle Symphony leeway to become one of the most prolific symphonies in America, with more than 180 recordings.

**1992**

## **Was the Voice of a Generation Actually Mudhoney?**

By 1992, Seattle was in fashion. Sub Pop cofounder Jonathan Poneman—a self-described “fashion spaz”—penned an article for *Vogue*. Marc Jacobs took flannel and combat boots to the runway for a Perry Ellis collection.

No band personified the scene’s contradictions better than Mudhoney, who became sort of winking Marie Antoinettes. They contributed “Overblown” to the *Singles* soundtrack: “Everybody loves us / Man, they give me the creeps.” After financial troubles at Sub Pop, the band decamped to a major label (Reprise) and released *Piece of Cake*. It opens with a techno parody and ends with pseudo-country “Acetone.” Between is an amalgam of artistic lazing (there are fart noises) and smartass disdain for the feeding frenzy.

**1991**

## **Evergreen Girl Power**

I have a f\*\*\*ing right to be hostile,” Kathleen Hanna proclaimed from the stage in the documentary *The Punk Singer*. “I’m not going to sit around and be peace and love with somebody’s boot on my fucking neck.” While Seattle had its share of female bands—see 7 Year Bitch, see Hammerbox—the city’s venues were overrun with moshing dudes.

Hanna and her band, Bikini Kill, formed at Evergreen State College in 1990 and led the Olympian charge to bring “girls to the front,” both rhetorically and physically. Their riot grrrl movement launched a multimedial assault on misogyny, racism, homophobia, and fat shaming. They held feminist fashion shows, published zines, and started a powerhouse music scene that launched the Kill Rock Stars label and bands like Bratmobile, the Third Sex, and Sleater-Kinney. Bikini Kill themselves released three full-length albums before Hanna created electropop-punk trio Le Tigre and her current band, the Julie Ruin. Whatever the genre, though, each is galvanized by Hanna’s elastic, ecstatic voice—here squealing, there belting, forever riveting.

**2000**

## **KEXP to the World**

In 2000 KCMU became the first station on earth to stream high-quality internet radio 24 hours a day. The next year it changed its name to KEXP and provided a living template for what local radio can be: In 2016, its YouTube channel reached 500,000,000 views—even as its DJs continue to uphold the city’s artists.

**2003**

## **Our Class of Conscious Hip-Hop**

“The Pacific Northwest take the spotlight now / My people pump your fist like you’re Manny Pacquiao,” rapped Geologic in the opening moments of the eponymous *The Blue Scholars*. With that Seattle had an answer to conscious hip-hop artists like Black Star and the Roots. Records from Common Market and Boom Bap Project quickly followed. Over crate-digging beats, MCs juxtaposed flurries of Seattle references (rain, the Ave, the Hill) with sesquipedalian bars as personal as they were political.

**2005**

## **King County Meet Orange County**

In episode 20 of *The O.C.*’s second season, as Marissa and Ryan try to bust an ecstasy dealer, Death Cab for Cutie commands the stage. The camera whips with amphetamine ardor as the band plays “The Sound of Settling.”

If angst dominated our music from 1985–1995, then introspective melancholy ruled the next decade. Carissa’s Wierd, Damien Jurado, Sunny Day Real Estate, and Pedro the Lion all proffered sadness readily. But Northwest indie reached its mainstream apotheosis when a couple of its bands played *The O.C.*

Modest Mouse and Death Cab had both been active for years making well-reviewed and moderately popular albums like *The Moon and Antarctica* and *Transatlanticism* (they reached 120 and 97 on the Billboard 200, respectively). Then in *The O.C.*’s first and second seasons both bands played live on the show, were featured on the soundtrack, and were repeatedly namechecked. Their subsequent records, both death-centric, rocketed up Billboard to 18 (*Good News for People Who Love Bad News*) and four (*Plans*). Though even as the show vaulted the music, it glibly dismissed it:

“It’s like one guitar,” one character, Summer, says of Death Cab, “and a whole lot of complaining.”

**2008–2011**

## **When Beard Oil Knew No Bounds**

While Sub Pop's second major sound looked a lot like its first—unkempt follicles, a fanatical devotion to faded outerwear—it sounded nothing like it. Band of Horses and their song “The Funeral” fired the beard rock starting pistol, but Fleet Foxes and the Head and the Heart soon followed and comprised the city's buzziest bands, with pastoral harmonies as lifted as the mountains they revered.

**1992 & 2013**

## **#1 Gimmick**

Why are the two biggest Seattle singles of the last 30 years—“Baby Got Back” and “Thrift Shop”—gimmicks? One's an unflappable ode to flapping asses, the other a goofy bargain-hunting riff. Sure, both songs are irrationally catchy, instantly digestible, and backed by memorable videos—you'll not likely forget Mix rapping in front of giant cheeks. And cultural permeation isn't equal to artistic achievement. So can the singles charts not bear serious art? Not quite: Kendrick Lamar and Childish Gambino held top spots recently. “Smells Like Teen Spirit” rose to number six only months before “Baby Got Back.” Perhaps we can glean only this: Never underestimate—quite literally in the case of “Thrift Shop”—the power of cheap laughs.

**2011–PRESENT**

## **Black to the Future**

Touted by most media as the first rappers signed to Sub Pop (they weren't), Shabazz Palaces did usher in a new era for the indie label, and in doing so, for Seattle. The duo's debut LP, *Black Up*, fused Afrofuturist jazz to esoteric rap. THEESatisfaction, who'd done a guest spot on the album, released *awE naturalE* the next year, approaching genre as though it were a galaxy of interrelated planets to be taken in all at once—soul, hip-hop, psychedelia, funk.

THEESatisfaction later split into solo acts, SassyBlack and Stas THEE Boss, who along with Shabazz remain fixtures in the local hip-hop scene. They've been joined by newcomers who—even as they find new expressions, the deftly diffuse DoNormaal, the Latinx bump of Guayaba—keep it dazzlingly nebulous.