

# From Lou Reed to Polar Bear Club: OHA museum looks back at the history of rock 'n roll in Syracuse



Lou Reed (center) performs at Syracuse University in this undated, untitled photo. (Courtesy of Syracuse University Archives)(Courtesy of Syracuse University)

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on February 18, 2015 at 7:00 AM, updated February 18, 2015 at 8:14 AM

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**SYRACUSE, N.Y. --** In 1957, Buddy Holly performed at the War Memorial in Syracuse. Two years later, the legendary rock 'n roller would be dead -- an accident famously chronicled by Don McLean.

Chuck Berry played there, too. So did Elvis, Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, The Who, Johnny Cash and countless others. And that's just one venue. U2 played on Erie Blvd. John Lennon and Yoko Ono performed at the Everson Museum. Lou Reed played all around SU.

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The History of Rock N Roll in Syracuse

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**Exhibit Opening &  
Benefit Show  
Feb. 20 at 5 P.M.**

*Featuring live music from*  
Phantom Chemistry  
Stonelord Brothers  
Inclusive Or  
With special guest The Flashcubes

OHA Members: Free General Public \$5  
All funds generated will go to support OHA

"Syracuse was an important enough stop in rock 'n roll that most of the big names played here at one point or another," says Ron Wray, a music historian and author of the "History of Syracuse Music" website. "The Stones, Bruce Springsteen, even Shania Twain, if you're going to that era. They all came to Syracuse."

Yes, Syracuse has earned its small spot in the annals of rock history. Starting Friday, then, the Onondaga Historical Association will pay tribute to that

history with its latest exhibit: The History of Rock 'n Roll in Syracuse. The exhibit runs for the next six months and admission to the museum, as always, is free.

## 'This isn't the Civil War'

During the adolescent age of rock 'n roll, Syracuse emerged as a prime market for the nation's biggest acts. As the genre came of age, the city featured prominently, due, in large part, **to the War Memorial**.

And while rock legends were blasting away at the Syracuse arena, local rockers were plugging away at scores of clubs and bars, developing a thriving scene.

The exhibit begins with the 1950s and creeps up to modern rock 'n roll. Its emphasis is on Syracuse, but it serves as a window into the cultural revolution that swept the nation in the 50s, 60s and 70s.

"The music scene really reflected how kids were growing up," says Jon Zella, who curated the exhibit. "These are cultural signifiers. We're not teaching rock history. People were there. They lived it. This isn't like the Civil War."

Zella collected old 8-tracks and 45s, a double-neck guitar from the 1960s, drum heads, concert posters, ticket stubs, newspaper clippings and even some old car radios. The exhibit combines memorabilia from local acts like **the Flashcubes** to big names that stopped here, like the Rolling Stones.

## Rock, then and now

While cobbling together relics of rock history, Zella tapped Wray as well as some notable musicians, including Gary Frenay, who played with the Flashcubes and Screen Test in the 1970s and 80s.

He also found traces of how and why rock culture in Syracuse (and nationwide) has changed.



The Flashcubes -- Paul Armstrong, Gary Frenay, Tommy

Allen and Arty Lenin -- are shown in 1978. *Bob Allen*

"The 60s was an amazing time around here," Frenay says. "Five or six nights a week the clubs were packed. It was such a scene."

It's true, clubs and music halls were plentiful in Syracuse during the heyday of rock 'n roll. Today, you're hard-pressed to find packed rock halls every night of the week. So what happened?

On December 1, 1985, New York State raised the legal drinking age from 19 to 21, in order to comply with the National Minimum Drinking Age Act. The change put a stranglehold on a movement promulgated by youthful culture.

"We would play college events that we'd played the year before and there were maybe 30 people when there'd been 200 the previous year," Frenay said. "Everybody was going to keggers instead. It took the heart out of the scene."

But rock endured -- though it would (arguably) never rival the scene developed in the 70s. Bands like Polar Bear Club, Earth Crisis or **Perfect Pussy** have superseded the city limits to earn acclaim on a national stage. Local rock still perseveres in the bars, clubs and hidden-away halls of Central New York.

And the OHA exhibit covers it all -- the good, the bad and the rocking history of Syracuse music.

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## The Party:

**What:** History of Syracuse Rock 'n Roll exhibit opening party featuring music from Phantom Chemistry, Inclusive Or, Stonelord Brothers and The Flashcubes

**When:** Friday, Feb. 20, 5 p.m. (music starts at 7 p.m.)

**Where:** Onondaga Historical Association, 321 Montgomery St., Syracuse

**Admission:** Free for OHA members; \$5 for general public