The Incredible Story of When Rock and Roll Legends Played a Delaware High School

April 3, 2020 • by Kevin Noonan

Mt. Pleasant High School's 1975 yearbook catalogued the incredible performers that graced the school's stage

It wasn't exactly Madison Square Garden, but, for several years, it was the closest Delaware had to a big-time musical venue, and it was just a cramped, high school gymnasium.

From 1969-75, Mount Pleasant High hosted some of the biggest names in popular music. It's mind-boggling to think that Rock and Roll Hall-of-Famers like Linda Ronstadt, Jackson Browne, Chicago, B.B. King and the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, as well as other popular acts like Grand Funk Railroad and Vanilla Fudge, pulled their tour busses into the parking lot off of Washington Street Extension.

“It was an amazing time,” said Nile Stanley, a member of the Class of 1972. “Looking back, some of the best memories of my life was seeing those bands, even though I had never heard of most of them at the time.”

“It was more than amazing,” said Andy McConnell, another member of the Class of '72. “When I'm traveling around the country or just talking with friends and I tell them about the bands we had at our high school, they don't believe me. And I don't blame them – I still have a hard time believing it, myself.”
The link between a high school in suburban Wilmington and those big-time bands was Jody Ambrosino, a teacher and coach at the school who also ran a side entertainment business called Amboy Productions, which gave Mount Pleasant an inside track when it came to bringing the bands to Delaware.

Probably the band that, in retrospect, was the biggest draw at the time it played at Mount Pleasant was Chicago, which had recently shortened its name from Chicago Transit Authority. When Chicago played at Mount Pleasant on Feb. 18, 1970, they were promoting one of their best and biggest albums, *Chicago II*, which featured mega-hits like *Make Me Smile* and *Colour My World*. That album eventually went platinum, which means it sold more than a million copies, and it was nominated for a Grammy Award for best album of the year. Luckily for Mount Pleasant, the school had booked the band before it hit the big time.

To put that appearance into perspective — during its 1970 tour, Chicago played at huge arenas like the Pittsburgh Civic Center and the Spectrum in Philadelphia, and it also played at legendary venues like Fillmore East in New York, Fillmore West in San Francisco, Whisky A Go Go in Los Angeles, Winterland in San Francisco, the...
Capitol Theater in New York and The Warehouse in New Orleans. Throughout that 161-date tour, Chicago mostly played at colleges, including what was then called West Chester State College, and the band only played at four high schools, including, of course, Mount Pleasant.

But the act that impacted Stanley the most was B.B. King, who was unknown to Stanley and many of the students at the school.

“I had no idea who he was at the time, but listening to him changed my life,” Stanley said. “There were just a few black students at Mount Pleasant at the time and we weren’t into the blues at all. Then B.B. King came out and I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. It was a real eye-opener. It was so deep and emotional that I immediately became a blues fan and started listening to it all of the time. That music had so much more power than the pop tunes you heard on the radio and things were never the same after I heard it. It was like a religious experience.”

Few students that go to Mount Pleasant today have heard of Vanilla Fudge, but that was the first big-name band to play at the school, on February 20, 1969. Vanilla Fudge was huge at the time, with hits like You Keep Me Hanging On and Season of the Witch. And here’s an interesting side note: During that 1969 tour, a newly-formed band from England opened for Vanilla Fudge during the early part of the tour – Led Zeppelin.

Unfortunately, Led Zeppelin wasn’t on the road with Vanilla Fudge when they played at Mount Pleasant. Still, it’s fun to imagine that band blowing the roof off of the high school gym. Alas, Vanilla Fudge, led by drummer Carmine Aspice and bassist Tim Bogert, broke up less than a year later, although they have since reformed and still tour with three of the original four members.
Another great band of that era that most current students at Mount Pleasant have never heard of was the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, but that group generated the most excitement when they played in Bellevue on March 16, 1971, because it had played at Woodstock less than two years before appearing at Mount Pleasant. Butterfield had an amazing career – early on, he played with blues giants like Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf and Little Walter, and later his band played at the infamous Monterey Pop Festival and, of course, Woodstock. Butterfield died in 1987 of a drug overdose, and the Paul Butterfield Blues Band was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2015.

Chicago was the biggest name at the time, but the best one-two punch to appear at Mount Pleasant came in 1974, when Jackson Browne opened for Linda Ronstadt.

“I really wasn’t into them too much at the time, because I had become a big jazz and blues fan, but, of course, when they came out and played, I was blown away by how good they were,” said Stanley, who also worked at Mount Pleasant’s radio station, WMPH-91.7 FM, which still plays an eclectic range of music, from today’s hip-hop hits to the music Stanley and his friends listened to when they were Green Knights.

Maureen Brennan Williams was a 15-year-old sophomore who had “been listening to Doctor My Eyes” on Browne’s first album “on repeat for at least a year.”

“I thought I was the coolest person in the world – Jackson Browne was at my high school!” said Brennan Williams. “I have been in love with him ever since.”

“I had a Jackson Browne album at the time, but didn’t know much about Linda Ronstadt,” McConnell said. “Of course, when she came out and played it was pretty amazing how good she was and what a terrific voice she had.”

Something else about the Ronstadt concert that amazes McConnell when he looks back on it now – Ronstadt’s back-up band at the time included Don Henley and Glenn Frey, who, a few months later, would start their own band, which they called the Eagles.

However, the best story from that concert comes from Brian Abrams, a 1970 graduate who was 20 when he returned to his alma mater for the Browne-
Ronstadt show. He and a friend, Randy Richter, didn't have tickets to the sold-out concert, so they got to the school early and hung out in the boys' locker room until showtime, then they snuck through the back of the stage and found ringside seats to the show.

But that's not even the best part of their once-in-a-lifetime tale. While they were back stage they struck up a conversation with one of the roadies, who invited them back to the bands' local headquarters, the Tally-Ho, which used to be a bar and hotel at the corner of Concord Pike and Naamans Road. So, they followed the roadie back to the Tally-Ho, and before they knew it, they were sitting in a hotel room with a bunch of people, including Jackson Browne. The two of them sat there, star-struck, as Browne and bandmate David Lindley played guitars and sang.

“It was surreal,” Abrams said. “We kept looking at each other like, ‘Is this really happening?’ We were in there for hours and everybody was as nice as could be. It was quite an experience.

“That was a very, very special time at Mount Pleasant,” Abrams added. “And we were incredibly lucky to be there when it happened.”
Kevin Noonan

Kevin Noonan has covered and commented on the Delaware sports scene for more than 30 years, everything from amateur recreation leagues and high schools to local colleges and the Philadelphia professional teams. He's been voted Delaware Sportswriter of the Year multiple times and currently covers the Philadelphia Eagles for CBSSports.com and teaches creative writing courses at Wilmington University.

17 Comments

Edward Harpham
April 4, 2020 at 8:57 am

A wonderful story on the Rock and Roll bands that appeared at Mount Pleasant High School beginning in 1969, the year that I graduated. A member of the student council at the time, I was charged with picking up Tim Bogert, the bass player for the Vanilla Fudge, at the airport. Their first album billed him as “Timmy.” He was not a “Timmy” in any way, shape or form. The culture was changing as was the world of rock and roll. A professional musician to the core, Bogert looked the part of a rock star in style and demeanor as he departed the plane looking for his 17 year-old driver. He was generous and kind on the ride to Wilmington down I-95.

Along with thousands of albums and cds, I still have the first Fudge album and smile when I put it on the turntable. Good memories of a great high school.

Edward J. Harpham
Dean, Hobson Wildenthal Honors College
The University of Texas at Dallas

Karl Smirh
April 4, 2020 at 9:30 am

Great times! I was there for the first 2 concerts (MtP class of 70) and yes.. Nobody believes me that Chicago played at my HS.
Michael Zeroka
April 4, 2020 at 9:57 am

I remember seeing The Chambers Brothers at MPH back then. “Time has come today” was a favorite and I still love to listen to them. Redbone and Cactus (formed when Vanilla Fudge broke up) played at St. Marks HS in May of 71.

Ellen White
Forbes
April 4, 2020 at 10:11 am

As a 1970 graduate of Mount Pleasant, the Chicago concert was a great memory. Interesting to also recall was the dress code had changed that school year and girls were allowed to wear slacks – initially pant suits. My first time wearing slacks to school was that concert.

Max Goldberg
April 4, 2020 at 11:05 am

Jody Ambrosino's partner in Amboy Productions was Frank Gamboy, an English teacher at MtP. The name of the company was a mash-up of their two names. When Chicago arrived at the school, I remember Jody asking their manager if he could book them again for the same price–around $5,000, if I recall correctly. Their manager just laughed. Chicago II was the hottest selling album in the country and the band was on an incredible trajectory. We were fortunate to have experience such great musicians at our high school.

Frances Kelleher
April 4, 2020 at 12:03 pm

I was in class of ’72. Mr. A was also our awesome Girl's Basketball Team head coach (as well as an inspiring 12th grade CCD teacher)- God bless you, Mr. Ambrosino for all you did for us at MtP & beyond! I sure wish I had gone to the concerts (but I probably had to be at my ‘after-school’ job serving at Mr Steak)!

Bruce Hood
April 4, 2020 at 12:38 pm

I remember the Chicago concert. The final vote put to the students was between that group and a soul group, Sam and Dave, of “Hold on, I’m Coming” and “I’m a Soul Man” fame. My
friends Don Morton, Ferris Wharton and Bill Davies, all class of 1970, fancied ourselves as soul men, so we voted for Sam and Dave. Fun times!

Bob Sawicki  
April 4, 2020 at 1:10 pm

George King and I were co-managers of the Chicago concert. The band arrived at the school around 5:00 pm. Their manager told us they had a brand new sound system and asked if they could try it out before the concert. They quickly set it up and played a few songs for just George and I who were the only other people in the gym. We also got to hang out with the band in the teachers' lounge, the first and only time I was ever in there. Some of them were friendly and not at all pretentious.

I believe the principal, Mr. Michaelwicz signed the contract for 6000. He was totally supportive of the concert including letting us hawk tickets at other high schools when sales were slow at first. We eventually sold out and made a few thousand in profits some which went to refinish the gym floor which was damaged during the concert. George and I dreamed of becoming rock concert promoters but we both went to college in the Fall and avoided being drafted.

John Skrobot  
April 4, 2020 at 5:08 pm

Great story Kevin. As a kid, my father (class of ’71) told me about the Chicago concert and how awesome it was. As you mentioned, they we booked before they really took off. The way he told it, Chicago tried to get out of the contract to play but MPHS wouldnt let them. And the rest is history.

Garry Ashby  
April 5, 2020 at 12:36 am

By the time Chicago arrived at MtP HS for the concert I knew every song on their first two albums thanks to Mr Ambrosino. He started off every history class blasting Chicago music on a small record player and hawking concert tickets to students in his class and out in the hallway. I obviously bought a ticket and recall one of the band members joking about the $6000 contract, “we got a deal”. It was an amazing concert, the gym was packed. They played full out, and several songs from both albums, CTA and Chicago II. Thanks Mr A and all the cool guys on student council that made it happen like George King.
Some corrections from a guy who was there. Linda Ronstadt opened for Jackson Browne. Seminal concerts at Mount Pleasant were omitted. We also had Bonnie Raitt. We had Bruce Springsteen booked, too, but when Born to Run caught fire in 1975 he backed out. As a member of the school's student council, we voted on which acts to bring in. English teacher Mr. Raab also help lead the process.

I was asked to speak to a filled auditorium in the same room in 2018 where I saw those legends perform. What a thrill and honor! Thanks for a great article.

One more addition: I can't speak to where the concerts were held prior to 1973. However from 1973-77 the concerts were held in Mount Pleasant's huge and spacious auditorium, not the gym. Then and now, the room is comfortable with terrific acoustics.

Another amazing fact. Our budget was capped at $4,000 per show. Imagine booking Jackson Browne AND Linda Ronstadt for that! I was in the Miami airport about a decade ago and ran into Jackson Browne's entourage, including Jackson. His handlers were simply amazed concerts could be booked for that price in the 1970s. Of course, a Geno's Giant burger only cost 60 cents then, too.

Just saw this article which Charlie Horn sent me. My recollection is that we paid $3,500 for Chicago plus 10% for their booking agent for a total of $3,850. I too was in the practice session Chicago had and that was a memorable moment which like Gary Smith says no one believes me when I tell them.

Thanks for the great article, Kevin! As a '76 graduate of MTP, I didn't experience earlier concerts and in fact, had no knowledge of them. Jody A. was my world history teacher and I had no idea that he was a concert promoter on the side – although knowing him, I am not surprised!

One correction to your story. I was at the Linda/Jackson concert – my first concert ever. The order of appearance was reversed – Linda first then Jackson. I remember this distinctly.
because people in the crowd kept yelling “we want Jackson” during Linda’s performance. I was mortified and embarrassed for my fellow students. Anyway, needless to say, it was a great concert and to this day, I get so much mileage out of the story that these famed musicians played at my high school. Thanks again for your great reporting!

Michael
April 6, 2020 at 5:06 pm
I don’t doubt that Jackson Browne and Linda Ronstadt could played but by ’74 Henley and Frey were 3 years into Eagles time. So unless it was at latest early ’71 they weren’t there

David Meader
April 7, 2020 at 11:47 am
I was at the Ronstadt/Browne show. It was in the gym because I believe there was a fire in the auditorium. I remember the principal being upset with Linda for singing the Lowell George song “Willing” because he though the line “Give me weed, whites and wine” was not appropriate for a high school audience.

Bennett White
April 8, 2020 at 3:00 pm
Kevin fantastic article. I graduated in ’74. I saw the Ronstadt / Browne concert. During the show Linda said she used to have a back up band with some guys who are now the Eagles. The crowd went nuts of course and yes it was in the gym. I also saw Bonnie Raitt a few years later at MTP. Awesome!
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