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MAGAZINE

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Under the Boardwalk
MUSICAL LANDMARKS OF THE
JERSEY *Shore*

BY DONALD H. SANBORN III



The Jersey Shore, which has a genre of rock 'n' roll named after it, features many landmarks that stand as a testament to its rich musical history. One example is the Count Basie Center for the Arts in Red Bank, which opened in 1926 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places in America. Beside Basie himself, artists who have performed there include Tony Bennett, Art Garfunkel, and Bruce Springsteen.

The Ocean City Music Pier was constructed in 1928, after a fire destroyed a large segment of the boardwalk. Built in the Spanish Revival style, the venue includes a concert hall which, the venue's website states, is "suitable for a great variety of shows from stand-up comedy to musicals" as well as the Ocean City Pops orchestra.

Residing in Atlantic City's Boardwalk Hall, the Midmer-Losh Pipe Organ is the largest organ in the world. Built in 1929, it boasts 33,112 pipes. After decades of nonuse, the organ was played again during the 2013 Miss America competition.

Listeners who enjoy organ music should also visit the Great Auditorium in Ocean Grove. That venue's organ was installed and dedicated in 1908. It boasts a 5-manual console and over 11,000 pipes; the website for the Garden State Theatre Organ Society describes it as "one of the largest and most famous working pipe organs in the country." Dr. Gordon Turk, the Auditorium organist and artist in residence, will give a series of concerts starting July 6.

No tour of the Jersey Shore's musical landmarks would be complete without a visit to Asbury Park. (Springsteen's debut studio album, released in 1973, is titled *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*) The annual Asbury Park Music Awards (formerly the Golden T-Bird Awards) launched at the T-Bird Café in 1993, and later moved to another venue, the Saint. Recently the ceremony has taken place at multiple larger venues, especially The Stone Pony.

THE STONE PONY

One of New Jersey's best-known venues is located on Ocean Avenue in Asbury Park. The Stone Pony opened in 1974, in a building that had housed a restaurant called Mrs. Jay's, and has hosted luminaries that include New Jersey natives Springsteen, Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes, and Jon Bon Jovi.

Kyle Brendle, the longtime house promoter at The Stone Pony, can list countless other names when engaged in a discussion of its history. Asked whether any musicians from Princeton have played at the iconic venue, Brendle instantly responds, "The great Blues Traveler!" The band formed in Princeton in 1987, and is known for singles such as "Run-Around," "But Anyway," and "Hook."

The Stone Pony was founded by John P. "Jack" Roig and Robert "Butch" Pielka. The venue's website reveals that for years, many believed that the "club's name came to Pielka in a dream. But in late December of 2014, Roig revealed that he was out with a young woman in October of 1973, and she was wearing a shirt with small horses all over the front of it. Jack says the shirt inspired the name."

Asked how The Stone Pony fit into Asbury Park's musical landscape at the time it opened, Brendle considers, "I don't think the Asbury Park music scene was really established as people know and remember it. There were a lot of cover bands, a lot of lounge acts, and there was a little bit of rock and roll. There was one great venue called the Sunshine In, doing concerts for two or three years before the Stone Pony opened."

"But The Stone Pony was before the 1970s music explosion happened — before the arrival of Bruce Springsteen as an international superstar," Brendle continues. "Southside Johnny, of course; our house band, The Stone Pony ... Bon Jovi; Sebastian Bach; and many other artists who came through Asbury. So I think the Pony changed the landscape, as Asbury Park became more of a rock 'n' roll town. The Asbury



Bruce Springsteen. (Shutterstock.com)

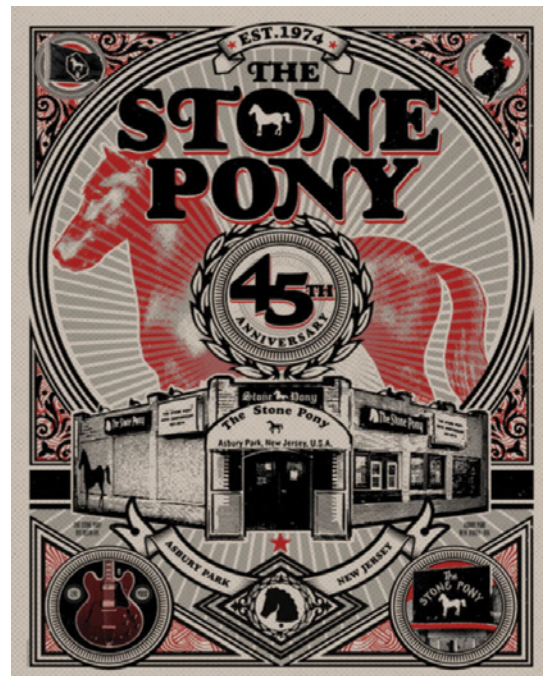
Park circuit started to line up with many more venues doing live music."

The Stone Pony's website notes that the club's opening night was beset with problems: "There were seven inches of snow, the heater blew out, and the night's receipts totaled one dollar. By December of 1974 ... foreclosure seemed imminent. That's when the first of the Pony's many "house bands," the Blackberry Booze Band, began playing regularly, and the large crowds they drew saved the club."

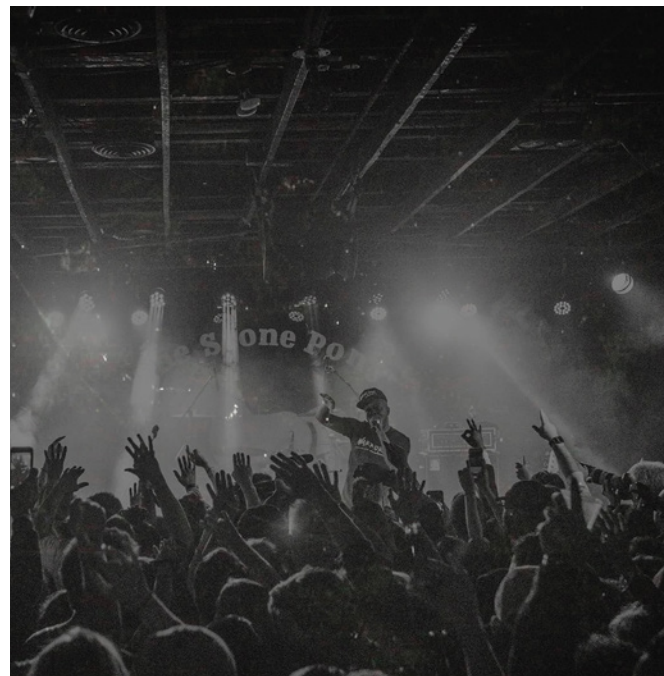
Members of the Blackberry Booze Band included Southside Johnny Lyon and Steven Van Zandt. Eventually the band grew and was renamed Southside



Vintage photo of Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes outside the Stone Pony. (Courtesy of The Stone Pony)



45th Anniversary Artist Print. (shop.stoneponyonline.com)



Current photo of The Stone Pony stage. (Courtesy of The Stone Pony)



Ocean City Boardwalk with the Music Pier in the background. (Wikipedia.com)

Johnny and the Asbury Jukes. The band played three nights a week at The Stone Pony, entertaining patrons with their “soulful, horn-driven, and classic R&B repertoire.”

In the 1980s many venues closed due to the increasingly prohibitive cost of expenses such as insurance. “There was a huge change going on in Asbury Park’s oceanfront area, commonly referred to as ‘the circuit,’” Brendle explains. “The circuit was loaded with bars, restaurants, venues of all kinds. They were starting to close ... there was an attempt at a redevelopment process that just wasn’t happening, and ended up going bust.”

In 1991 the Stone Pony was sold in bankruptcy court. It was purchased by Steve Nassar, who in 1998

converted it into a dance club called Vinyl. In 2000 the venue was sold again, this time to Jersey City restaurateur Domenic Santana.

In May of that year it reopened as The Stone Pony, and was rededicated by then-Gov. Christie Todd Whitman. “A visit to The Stone Pony has been considered a pilgrimage to rock ‘n’ roll fans around the world,” Whitman remarked at the time.

Asked about his favorite memories of some of the famous artists who have performed at The Stone Pony, Brendle enthusiastically replies, “Well, there’s lots! But I could tell you of a few that pop up immediately. We had the great Stevie Ray Vaughan once; Huey Lewis and the News; we always had members of the Allman Brothers Band.”

Remembering some of “Asbury’s favorites,” Brendle eagerly adds to the list Springsteen, Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes, John Eddie, Glen Burtnik, and Bobby Bandiera. He also adds the Black Crowes, who will perform there again on June 30. Their concert is titled *The Black Crowes Present: Shake Your Money Maker*. “They’re going to play that great album [their 1990 debut recording] in its entirety,” promises Brendle.

As for events that are upcoming this summer, Brendle adds: “Starting in June we have Summer Stage shows; June 3 is Bright Eyes.” Other events he lists are Nathaniel Rateliff & the Night Sweats (July 1), Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes (July 2), and Flogging Molly and the Interrupters (July 3). Brendle says, “We’re always looking forward to Fourth of July weekend at Asbury Park!”

THE TURF CLUB

In the 1960s, Asbury Park’s Springwood Avenue was a thriving hub of music venues. The Turf Club is the only building that currently remains of those places. Since 2017 the Asbury Park African-American Music Project (AP-AMP) has been gathering stories about The Turf Club, and is working to renovate it, with the

intent of reopening a venue the organization describes as the “last chance to preserve a physical piece of Springwood Avenue’s music history.”

Robert and Caroll Brown opened The Turf Club at 1125 Springwood Avenue in 1940. “We don’t have a lot of history about that site; we’ve been focused more on 1200 Springwood, which is the current building where The Turf Club is located still,” says Jennifer Souder, a board member of AP-AMP. “But we do know that The Turf Club was a key spot in terms of places people would have known to go and listen to good jazz. It was also right at the intersection of a central area of Springwood Avenue, a key community spot.”

“It’s also important to emphasize that The Turf Club was just one of many music venues on Springwood Avenue on the west side,” adds Yvonne Clayton, another AP-AMP board member. “The west side was a haven back in the 1930s and 1940s for African Americans. It was a safe place to come and be entertained. It was on the Chitlin’ Circuit, midway between New York, Philadelphia, and Atlantic City.”

In 1948, ownership of The Turf Club was transferred to Leo Karp and Sol Konvitz, who operated the club at its original location until 1955. That year, Karp published plans for construction of a new Turf Club building at 1200 Springwood Avenue (the property now owned by AP-AMP).

Leo’s Turf Club opened on June 30, 1956.

A booklet published by AP-AMP notes, “Music became a mainstay of The Turf Club beginning in 1959 and particularly the 1960s, offering local and national jazz, blues, and R&B acts.” Musicians who performed there include Al Griffin and the Gents of Jazz; keyboardist Dee Holland; and saxophonist Clarence Clemons, who later joined Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band (and who also played at The Stone Pony).

The Turf Club changed hands, and names, several more times. In the late 1990s a fire damaged parts of the building, forcing it to close. In 2004 Tamar Ayyash purchased the property — which had entered



The Boardwalk Hall Auditorium organ in Atlantic City. (Source: Wikipedia)



A "Tuesdays at the Turf" concert in July 2021. (Photo by Conni Freestone)



Turf Club side entrance, with murals by Larry Walker (2021). (Photo by Conni Freestone)



The Turf Club in 2021. (Photo by Jen Souder)



The Turf Club before cleanup (July 2020). (Photo by Conni Freestone)



A "Tuesdays at the Turf" concert in July 2021. (Photo by Conni Freestone)



The Count Basie Center for the Arts. (Source: Wikipedia)



American jazz bandleader and pianist Count Basie, seated at the piano, in 1955. (Wikipedia)



AP-AMP logo. (Illustration by Charles Trott)

foreclosure — and removed the roof for repairs. In 2012 the building was purchased by Vince Gifford, who sold it to AP-AMP in January of this year.

Clayton recalls, “When we went to Gifford and said, ‘We would like to buy the building.’ He said, ‘OK.’ We said, ‘We don’t know when we’ll be able to pay for it; we don’t have any money.’ He said, ‘OK.’ Then, when things started to happen in the city, and other people became interested in development, interested in the building, he was committed to us, and he waited until we had the funds to pay for it. So we are very indebted to Vince Gifford, because he saw our vision, and he supported it.”

AP-AMP began working in 2017, and formed as a

nonprofit in 2018.

Both Clayton and Souder are quick to acknowledge the help of the Asbury Park Public Library in getting the project going. Souder says, “We went to the library as a loosely-formed volunteer group, and said we wanted to apply for a grant from the New Jersey Historical Commission. The library partnered with us, because we didn’t have a 501(c)(3) at the time. We were focusing on Springwood Avenue history, and then The Turf Club came into focus in a more recent time.”

Currently AP-AMP is planning a capital campaign to raise funds for renovations; Clayton notes that a fundraising event will take place on

June 5. Souder adds, “We can confirm is that it is a fundraiser for the renovation of The Turf Club, and that there will be live music, and it will be at the Black Bird (131 Atkins Avenue) down the street from The Turf Club.”

Last summer AP-AMP hosted a series of concerts at the (currently still roofless) property, Tuesdays at the Turf. “We’d have people come in and bring their own chairs, and enjoy the summer evenings — and live music,” Clayton says. Performing musicians included Al Holmes and the Tribe, Vel Johnson, and Bill Carter, to name a few.

Souder recounts that a particularly special moment in the series occurred when 96-year-old saxophonist Cliff Johnson visited and “said he performed at every single venue on Springwood Avenue. He’s a phenomenal musician,” so it was gratifying that he had the opportunity to “see some of the musicians that he inspired.”

When Bob Lee, a musician now based in California, returned to celebrate his birthday and perform at one of the events. “A lot of other musicians ... joined him,” says Souder. “It was a coming home for a lot of Asbury Park musicians.”

The organization is planning to resume the series this summer. There will be six events, starting July 5. The events start at 6 p.m. and last for two hours.

Looking at The Turf Club today, one will see murals on the sides of the building, painted by artist Larry Walker. Souder explains, “That was a collaboration with Springwood Avenue Rising, which is another local nonprofit. The theme is the music and history of Springwood Avenue, so as you walk by you’ll see musicians, many of whom performed in The Turf Club. Other images are about music and Springwood Avenue history.”

Of AP-AMP’s plans for The Turf Club once renovations are complete, Clayton says, “It’s going to be a live music venue; it will be a place for musicians to come and play, and for the neighborhood — and the greater area of Asbury Park — to come hear live music in a little jazz club.”

She adds that it also will “be a place where musicians can teach our young people how to play instruments. There used to be places in Asbury Park, like the West Side Community Center, where many people learned how to play instruments for the first time. We’re trying to bring that concept back.”

Asked what she particularly wants readers to know about AP-AMP and The Turf Club, Clayton says, “What we’re doing is vital; this is a history that could easily be lost. When you think of Asbury Park, you think of Bruce Springsteen and the ‘Asbury sound.’ No one thinks, ‘Oh, Clarence Clemons came out of The Turf Club’ — and he played with Springsteen. It’s a history that we’re so fortunate to be able to share.”

Souder adds, “This history — Springwood Avenue, and African American music history — is central to the story of Asbury Park and the region. There’s this rich history that formed the foundation of the stories of the community.”

She adds that AP-AMP wants to bring the venue back so that visitors can “enjoy the music, but also understand the stories.” ■