

What Happened Here?

PRESENTATION SCRIPT

Part I

Slide 1

Slide 2

Let's play a game. It's called KEYWORDS.

Slide 3

The Headline News Network began broadcasting this game last spring. Two teams of two people start by being shown the same single term. When the clock starts running, an additional term is added to the list every 3 seconds until there a total of five words.

Slide 4

The object of the game is for a team to determine the relationship among the terms, buzz in, then give the correct answer.

We won't divide into teams and I will NOT stop at five words. I'm going to give you a few extra clues.

Slide 5

Here's your first word---GO!

Slides 6-20

By now I suspect that everyone knows that all of these terms are names of rock groups that originated in Athens, Georgia, and my presentation centers primarily on two of the more notable Athens groups: The B-52s and R.E.M.. The program committee graciously allowed me to post an intentionally vague title, hoping for an element of surprise. It should be, more completely:

Slide 21

What Happened Here? Rock Music's Early Days in Athens Georgia

Honestly, I've never been a particularly avid fan of rock music as a whole. Like the great majority of all the folks in this room, in college I spent many hours shut in practice rooms trying to master the music I needed to present at juries. Over the years, I've there have been particular rock groups I was drawn to and I had a mental list of favorite songs along the way. I'll even go so far as to tell you a deep, dark secret: in high school I played in a "combo," and our fare ran from what I would call POP, to country, to folk, and even to a few originals. I took my girlfriend—who is still my wife-- too see the Carpenters in Nashville, and in college I even attended my college's homecoming concert one year to hear Linda Rondstadt.

Months ago, when I heard that we were going to be in Athens, Georgia for our 2015 annual meeting, the brain wheels moved a bit. I seemed to remember that Athens was home to a notable rock group or two. I had to do some research just to learn WHICH groups were from here. I learned that I had no understanding of the enormity of the Athens rock community, but I wanted to know more.

You and I are about to take a jet-fueled, high-altitude flight overhead to look at and listen to some things that happened near the end of the 70s and at the beginning of the 80s in Athens. But first, I want to set the cultural scene:

Slide 22

I won't read them, but scan through these are events that happened in and around the 1970s.

Slide 23, 24, 25

These were pretty tumultuous times in many ways weren't they? Does it surprise any of us that during the late 70s, one musical emphasis in the US was Punk: a music that angrily and sometimes violently lashed out?

Part II

The Athens tale begins...

Slide 26

Keith Strickland and Ricky Wilson (Slide 27) quickly became good friends after meeting at an Athens high school. They bonded largely because of their similar interests: art, music, esoterica, and a belief in extraterrestrials and flying saucers. It didn't take long before the two were composing and making music together: Keith crafting the words and Ricky playing guitar, which he had taught himself to do watching an instructional program on public TV. In these early years they would play together in two bands: Black Narcissus and the Zambo Flirts. They would eventually travel twice to Europe together, then move back to Athens. Ricky moved into a house with his sister, Cindy (28), a waitress in the cafeteria at a local department store.

Fast Forward...

On a spring day in the early 1970s, 19 year old Keith Strickland strode onto the UGA campus with a group of friends to listen to a new band. He was dressed in a gold lame' jacket, with a Mack truck mirror hung around his neck and his hair jacked out stiff from half a can of Aqua Net. His attire that day contrasted dramatically with the sorority/fraternity kids and the 1960s leftover hippies. Walking up to the plaza he discovered the band was awful and that no one was dancing, except two people he didn't know: a girl, and a guy wearing a horrific Hawaiian shirt. Keith thought these two looked like acceptable candidates so, he danced up to them and, with a

smile on his painted lips, dumped a bag of shredded foam pillow stuffing on their heads. Thus began a friendship between Keith and Fred Schneider (Slide 29), a New Jersey boy who had move to UGA in 1969 to study forestry. They began occupying their time with tape recording: Fred reciting original poetry, Keith creating experimental sounds on his guitar, all the while both being inspired to greater artistic heights with the inhalation of the smoke of the cannabis plant.

Fast forward again...

Kate Pierson (Slide 30) and her husband, Brian, moved to Athens in 1973, with no apparent reason other than to seek a bohemian lifestyle! Like Fred, Kate grew up in New Jersey. Kate would eventually fall in socially with the rest of the group members mentioned already.

By 1976 Fred had left for Atlanta. He was in his mid-twenties and still didn't know what he wanted to do when he grew up, but he continued to keep up with his friends. On a visit back to Athens, he, Kate, Keith, Ricky, and Cindy wound up at a friend's house after a night of drinking. A few instruments were available so they went to the basement for an informal jam and worked on writing a song the called "Killer B's." Everyone must have been pleased with their musical maiden flight because, before Fred went back to Atlanta, everyone agreed do it again. In coming months, they would get together often and combine their lyrics, their thoughts, and their music. Fred felt so positive about these early collaborations that he moved back to Athens. (Slide 31)

Some friends announced they were having a Valentine's party. Fred asked if their new group could play. The band, without a name, had their first gig. February 14, 1977, in a cramped little house at the corner of Milledge and Prince Streets. The B-52s--a name settled on by the group only a few days before--made their first public appearance, and apparently it was

sensational. Though their set consisted of only six original songs played over and over, guests danced until everyone thought the floor would collapse. Afterward, the campus buzzed with the news.

That first set contained what would become an early signature song: “Rock Lobster”

****This video was shot in 1978 not very long after their first public performances and only a month or so before the group’s first album was released. The sound and balance are terrible, but I thought this was worth seeing. Note “surfer” guitar lick at the beginning.

[\(Link 31\)](#)

The second public outing for the group came soon afterward at an engagement party planned by a friend of Keith and Ricky’s from Athens High, Teresa Randolph (file that name away for later). When it came off, the venue was packed. For this performance Kate and Cindy were dressed in what would become their signature look: typical select thrift store treasures and for the first time wore their hair in stiff bouffants that were teased ‘til it screamed! (Slide 32).

In late summer of 1977 the B-52s scored a monumental opportunity. With the help of a friend, Curtis Knapp, the group secured a date to play in New York City at the club Max’s Kansas City. Remember: at this point the Bs had played only two previous public performances. So, to help prepare for their New York gig, Knapp scheduled a third performance date for them in Athens. A quote from Rodger Lyle Brown’s book *Party Out of Bounds* is appropriate here:

[For the third performance],...they bought a couple of kegs. They moved the furniture out of the living room and into the yard and set up the drums on a big dining room table.

That party was the first time the B-52s played with a real drum kit.

A friend, Danny Bear recalls: They only had six songs. The room where they played was smaller than a den and it was jammed. People were looking around the corner from the next room and staring in windows. This was one week before their show in New York. In 1978 their first single was published featuring “Rock Lobster” and in 1979 their first album “The B-52s” were heard. The Bs assured that Athens was now on the musical map. Their style of music, labeled usually as “New Wave,” poised itself somewhat in opposition to mainstream rock in that it ignored the “highly produced and sophisticated sounds” of the early 70s that guaranteed high profits and moved forward a more “do-it-yourself” attitude that was rooted in the punk genre. The appeal of New Wave was “to DO something (like dance), rather than to dispassionately “listen to a performance“...to listen to something promoted with slick marketing that guaranteed high profits. The DIY approach also included the idea that “New Wave bands had a clear fascination with earlier musical styles--and perhaps, more important--with the visual images associated with those styles.”. (Remember the Surfer guitar lick and 60s organ sound of “Rock Lobster?” How about the bouffants and kitschy clothes?) New Wave continued a “do-it-yourself” attitude--train yourself, record yourself, and promote yourself. In a sense, their performances might have been described as performance art.

There were ups and downs, problems and successes. Ricky died of AIDS in 1985 after which the group took a 2-year hiatus. They came back later as a 4-piece band. In 1979 they secured a recording contract in New York and all moved there. The B-52s--with some occasional personnel changes--are still touring today. In fact, they’re playing tonight at the Fox Theatre in Atlanta, nearly 40 years after they started making music together. (Slide 33) (Link 33)

****Love Shack****

Part II

R.E.M. (Slide 34)

Peter Buck, was born in Los Angeles, CA in 1956 and possessed a keen interest in music from an early age—listening to everything from the Beatles to the Supremes and later to punk rockers like the Velvet Underground, Patti Smith, the Ramones, and the New Wave group, Blondie. He and his family moved to Georgia in 1970. After finishing high school, Buck made an abortive attempt at college at Emory university, spent a couple of years travelling around the country, then eventually wound up again in Athens working at Wuxtry Records. Here's a quote from *Remarks—The Story of R.E.M.* by Tony Fletcher:

Towards the end of his first year in Athens, Peter began to recognize among the new visitors to Wuxtry a quietly-spoken teenager with good taste and two attractive females on his arm. (Quoting Buck) "I thought, 'God! This guy's got two great looking girlfriends. He must be pretty hip.'" "The girls were sisters, Lynda and Cindy; the boy was their brother, Michael Stipe. (Slide 35)

Michael Stipe, born in Decatur, GA, had grown up on military bases all over the world. He was a painfully shy child and seemed to prefer to observe rather than to participate. In high school in Illinois, he began to listen to and absorb the ethos of New York Punk. His knowledge of punk supplemented by the burgeoning bravado of adolescence made him more self-assured, outgoing, and popular. He even fronted a punk band for a short while. Following high school, he returned to GA and enrolled in UGA's Department of Art in 1978. After their meeting at Wuxtry, Michael and Peter Buck became friends and began to discuss their shared wish of wanting to start a band. (Slide 36)

Mike Mills was born in Oakland County in 1958, but moved to Macon, Georgia so early in life (1968) that he considered himself a local. He studied piano, and sousaphone in the high school marching band and later picked up electric bass. (Slide 37)

Bill Berry, born in Duluth, MN moved to Macon, GA in 1972. He scored so high on a music aptitude test in school that he was encouraged to learn to play an instrument. He chose drums. There's an interesting story regarding these two. When they first met as ninth graders at high school in Macon, Georgia, it was animosity at first sight. Bill was enjoying the thrills of adolescence and starting to experiment with drugs. He despised everything Mike was: a great student, cooperative with his teachers, and didn't smoke cigarettes or pot. Communication between the two was minimal.

At some point, Bill was asked to be the drummer for a group that was to play at an after school southern boogie jam in Macon and told to meet to rehearse one afternoon at the bass player's house. When Bill walked in the house he discovered that Mike was the bass player and almost didn't stay. But he decided to see the engagement through and by the end of the session the two were no longer enemies. In fact, they teamed up to work together as a rhythm section whenever they could, including as part of a lounge trio led by their school music teacher.

After other low-paying and menial jobs, in 1979 these two moved to Athens and to the dorms at UGA with the intention of getting an education.

The Church (Slide38)

Pete Buck, and his boss at Wuxtry, Dan Wall, shared an apartment in an abandoned and deconsecrated Episcopal Church on Oconee Street. When Dan was called back to Atlanta to manage the Wuxtry shop there, he made arrangements for Peter and a young woman Peter knew from Atlanta, Robin Bragg, to take over his lease. This apartment was part of what was more or less like an entire apartment building that had been set inside the church. There were walls inside walls. There was no access—except a hole in a wall in a closet--into what had been the sanctuary area. In the fall of 1979 Buck and Bragg, along with Stipe, moved into the building. Peter and Michael began writing songs and the hidden sanctuary became a retreat, rehearsal hall, and concert venue for the next year or so.

Brokering the Deal (Slide 39)

Kathleen O'Brien had her own radio show on the university's student-run radio station WUOG and knew all the major players we've been introduced to so far. She was convinced that the four musician needed to get together to try forming a complete ensemble and, at the right time, she made the needed introductions. The four men were skeptical at first, but got together at the church. To speed the musical amalgamation of the four, Kathleen quickly made an invitation for the band to play her April 5th 20th birthday party to be held at the church. The group agreed and spent the next three weeks feverishly writing songs and rehearsing.

The Party (Slide 40)

There were three local groups playing at the April 5th party and no one had expected the 300 to 500 people that showed up that night to listen and to party. After the set, people milled around. That night, the group scored invitations for two more local performances, one at the Koffee Klub

on April 19, 1980 and then as an opening act for an Atlanta Band—The Brains—on May 5th at a club that would play a large role in Athens music—Tyrone’s.

A week later, the group—now called REM--would headline at Tyrone’s.

REMs rise to fame came at a different pace and on a different trajectory than that of the B-52s. Their rise to international notoriety was slower. Whereas the B’s were virtually an overnight sensation and rocketed to national fame in no time, [\(Slide 41\)](#) REM toured throughout the southeast for about two years. In 1981, they cut a single recording “Radio Free Europe” which would be re-recorded about a year later and released on the album “Murmer.” [\(Link 41\)](#).

Ten Years later, R.E.M. recorded “Losing My Religion” on the album “Out of Time” and later released it as a single. It became one of the top hits of their entire career.

[\(Slide 42\)](#) [\(Link42\)](#)

Labels of genres or subdivisions of rock music are somewhat hard to delineate and sometimes unevenly applied. Generally, REM is considered a child of punk rock and they are labeled an Alternative group or as Indie or Independent, to separate themselves from mass-produced, mass-promoted commercial music. They would arguably become the most notable group coming out of the Athens Revolution.

Why did all this happen when and where it happened? Here are a few thoughts:

1. The B-52s were a reaction and release from the stressful 1970s: Fun, craziness, and dancing. R.E.M represented a quiet rebellion against the music establishment and creative expression
2. A liberal college atmosphere, particularly in the art school, that encouraged wide-ranging creativity.
3. Small town with little to do. Time to be creative
4. Proximity to Atlanta allowed exposure to cutting-edge groups
5. Forward thinking record shop--Wuxtry
6. "Do-it-yourself" spirit held over from punk
7. Particularly for R.E.M., easy and frequent access to local clubs that encouraged local groups (Tyrones, The 40-Watt Club)
8. A student run college radio station that had few hard and fast rules and a penchant for promoting local groups

And frankly—(Slide 44)

Accidents Do Happen...and Most of the Time, They're Not on Purpose

It has been surmised that it could have been the water, the red clay, the drugs, the alcohol, the alignment of the stars, or Karma. It was likely none of these and all of these: the right people in connection with one another, at the right place that encouraged individuality and creativity and opportunities to perform, and the right people listening at the right time who had the ability to promote, publicize and record the groups.

Remember Theresa Randolph who I asked you to remember earlier? It was at her engagement party the B-52s made their second public appearance. Even in 1977, listeners at that party realized something special was going on in a small, Georgia college town.

This final story about Ms. Randolph sums thing up:

“Theresa was getting pretty wild,’ Kate Pierson recalls, of The B-52s second public performance. ‘She was up on somebody’s shoulder and was screaming, ‘I CAN’T BELIEVE THIS IS HAPPENING IN ATHENS, GEORGIA!’”

END

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