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# NYC classic rock locations: Cafe Wha?

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Cafe Wha? 115 Macdougall Street in Greenwich Village

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From the late 1950s through the 1960s, the coffeehouses and cafes on a few streets in [Greenwich Village](#) wielded an influence on music and pop culture that endures. Many rock and folk music legends began at storied clubs such as The Village Gate, The Gaslight Cafe, and Cafe au Go Go, having paved the way for the area anchored by Bleecker and Macdougall Streets to become known as [America's Left Bank](#).

Of the many influential venues that once reigned in this small area near Washington Square Park, only two survived. [Cafe Wha?](#), which opened on 115 Macdougall in 1959, launched the careers of [Bob Dylan](#), [Jimi Hendrix](#), and Bruce Springsteen, among many others. The Bitter End at 147 Bleecker debuted two years later and is also still open.

At the height of the beatnik counterculture in the late 1950s, Manny Roth began a distinguished career in opening and owning Greenwich Village nightclubs. First, he founded The Cock and Bull, which later became The Bitter End.

In 1959, Roth discovered an old horse stable on Macdougall Street and saw the potential for the small space to become a coffeehouse. “He spent his last \$100 on a truckload of broken marble to make the floor, which he personally laid. He sprayed the walls with black paint to create the feeling of a cave. There were castoff chairs and candles in blue glass flickering on every table. Full occupancy was 325,” according to the [“New York Times.”](#)

When Bob Dylan arrived in New York in early 1961, he headed straight to [Cafe Wha?](#) and asked Roth if he could play a few songs. It was a “hootenanny night” there — when anyone who wanted to sing a couple of songs was allowed to get up on the stage — so Dylan was allowed to perform. He took out his guitar and sang a few songs, winning over the crowd and kicking off a legendary career that has lasted more than half a century.

In the mid-60s, Roth hired a then-unknown Jimi Hendrix, who was going by the name Jimmy James and fronted The Blue Flames. In 1966, Animals bassist Chas Chandler saw them at Cafe Wha? and [was so impressed that he became James’s manager](#), which led to Hendrix soon becoming a rock superstar.

Also in the mid-60s, Bruce Springsteen’s band, the Castiles, played afternoon sets at Cafe Wha? and Mary Travers worked as a waitress before joining the famous folk trio Peter, Paul and Mary.

In 1968, Roth left Cafe Wha? and after some changes in ownership, the club returned to what it made famous — the music. These days, it hosts a variety of bands, as well as the popular [Cafe Wha? House Band](#).

On January 5, 2012, [Van Halen played a show at Cafe Wha?](#), to officially announce their 2012 tour and new album. The band’s lead singer, David Lee Roth, is the nephew of Manny Roth, who passed away in 2014.

Although the original owner is gone, his influence still remains a strong presence at Cafe Wha? In late February 2015, the club underwent renovations — but held onto something special. “We kept the original Manny Roth marble floor,” said Hap Pardo, Cafe Wha’s Director of Musical Operations. “We knew we couldn’t touch that, just because it’s such an integral part of the club, and he talked about it all the time.”

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