

Roostertail celebrates 50 years of parties, live music and memories

Susan Whitall / The Detroit News

It was June 1958, just as the atomic age was giving way to the swinging '60s, and a sleek new restaurant opened with floor to ceiling views of the Detroit River.

The Roostertail was built by Joe Schoenith as a 50th birthday present for his wife, Millie. Schoenith was head of the electrical contracting firm W.D. Gale (now the Gale Group), and a sponsor of hydroplane powerboat racing (the Schoeniths won four national championships and two Gold Cups, among many trophies).

The eatery, ultra-modern for 1958, was named after the spray of water that jets up in back of a hydroplane boat.



Tom and Diane Schoenith stand on the deck with the Roostertail complex behind them. Tom's parents opened the Roostertail in June 1958. (Donna Terek / The Detroit News)

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Last week, owners of the Roostertail held a special event to commemorate the 50th anniversary with friends and supporters, such as former WOMC host Tom Ryan, Bob Seger/Kid Rock attorney Mike Novak, traffic reporter Jo Jo Shuttie-MacGregor, longtime Roostertail manager Paul Hohendorf and Johnny Trudell, the Motown trumpet player who backed acts in the nightclub's early years.

The club was known for booking the best in entertainment, including all the top Motown acts. The Roostertail was referenced in the Broadway musical about the Four Seasons, "Jersey Boys." (A character asks "Where are Frankie and the boys?" and another character replies, "In Detroit at the Roostertail.")

In the film mostly about the Supremes, "Dreamgirls," the Crystal Room, the posh Detroit club where the Dreams play, is a thinly veiled stand-in for the Roostertail.

For Joe and Millie Schoenith, who had three children -- son Lee and twins Tom and Jerry (named after the popular Christmas drink) -- the Roostertail was just one of many business and social interests.

"They never worked here; it was strictly a place to have dinner," says Tom Schoenith of his parents at a bash last week commemorating the 50th anniversary.

Recalling the restaurant's opening, Schoenith says they were forced to open prematurely. "They were still laying carpet, but there were so many people coming up, wanting to get in, that we had to open. When you look at the windows in this place, and the view, there still isn't anything like it 50 years later."

From 1958 until the mid-60s, the Roostertail booked the top tier of Las Vegas-style acts.

"Lotta history here, kiddo," Trudell says. "Bobby Darin, Tony Bennett, the Mills Brothers -- there were about 1,000 people that came through. All the acts that worked in Vegas worked here."

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Trudell played at the Roostertail from its first days open in 1958, backing acts like Bennett and Darin. In the '60s, Trudell was the main trumpet player on countless Motown records, and he was there at the Roostertail backing up acts like the Four Tops.

The Motown connection was potent. In 1966, the Roostertail's Upper Deck became the location for "Motown Mondays" hosted by WKNR disc jockey Scott Regen. The Upper Deck was where Detroit teenagers could go to see the Supremes one week and the Four Tops the next. Several live Motown albums were recorded at the Roostertail, including "Four Tops Live!"

"When you think you could see the Supremes here, and our maximum was 450 people," Schoenith, now 65, marvels. "For my 24th birthday, we had Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs, the Association ... The Smothers Brothers played my graduation from high school. We were always with entertainers, so it's one big blur, and I don't remember them all."

He does remember a trick he and wife Diane played on Bette Midler when she came to Detroit to perform a concert in the '70s.

Tom called and canceled the limousine her management had ordered to drive her around. Instead, he and Diane met the diva at the airport in a motor home. They proceeded to drive her around town for three days, partying intensively, with Midler thinking they were official representatives of the city of Detroit. Eventually they told her who they were, and they all had a good laugh.

Elton John had two birthday parties at the Roostertail, and the Schoeniths were asked to put one on for rocker Eric Clapton's 35th birthday. To entertain Clapton and then-love Pattie Boyd, the Roostertail was stocked with "kid food" -- hot [dogs](#) and candy -- and Schoenith hired a plane that carried a banner that spelled out, in lights, "Happy Birthday, Eric."

Also on hand for last week's 50th anniversary bash was Bill Zoufal, who was the Roostertail's manager from 1965-70. Zoufal has some tales to tell, like one about the night an extremely large man got drunk and combative, and 12 Roostertail employees had to carry him out to an extra-large paddy wagon.

Then there were the three Lincoln Continentals accidentally driven into the water by parking valets.

But the manager's most amazing Roostertail moment happened one time when he was walking upstairs to his office. Zoufal's hands were full, so he had to kick the door open.

"And there was Diana Ross, with no clothes on," he remembers. "She was changing in my office!"

Somehow, both star and nightclub manager regained their composure, Ross got dressed, and the show went on.

Because so much Detroit music history happened at the Roostertail in its first 20 years, it's hard for people to remember that for the past 30 years it's been strictly a venue for private parties, including weddings and proms.

"We've been doing private parties longer than we were a restaurant," Tom Schoenith says. Tom and Diane's sons Michael and John now own and operate the Roostertail, although Tom is often asked to be on hand for big bashes.

Often people still get confused and think they can pop in to the Roostertail for a perch dinner. Last week a TV station conducted interviews with the Schoeniths, calling the venue a "restaurant."

"Then we get phone calls, people want to do dinner. We say, 'No we're not a restaurant.' They say, 'Well, Channel 2 said you are'," Tom Schoenith says with a sigh.

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