

# The Belleville Sound



By Will Shannon and John Wegrzyn

For a city of fewer than 50,000 residents, Belleville enjoys a rich and varied musical history. In the mid twentieth century, it teemed with local bands and people who were headed for stardom. Here are a few stories of Belleville people who made it big, all of which are a part of a comprehensive exhibition celebrating the city's musical heritage.



## Belleville Is Dead

Though they never played in Belleville, The Grateful Dead have Belleville connections.

The first came in the form of Jon McIntire. Born in 1941 in Mount Vernon, Ill, McIntire grew up in Belleville. McIntire excelled at music from a young age. He performed as a child pianist and became a charter member of the Early Music Society of St. Louis. After graduating from Belleville Township High School in 1959, McIntire eventually moved to San Francisco to attend San Francisco State University. There, he met Rock Scully and Danny Rifkin.

Scully and Rifkin planned to leave school to manage The Grateful Dead.



(Left) Grateful Dead manager Jon McIntire as a senior at Belleville Township High School in 1959; (Right) McIntire in the 1980s, during his second stint as the band's manager.

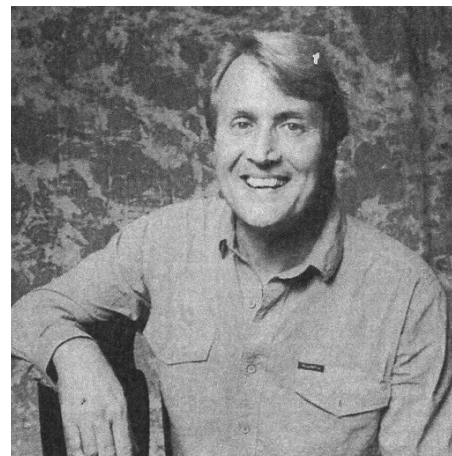


Visitors exploring the displays at the opening of The Belleville Sound at the Belleville Public Library in September of 2022.

McIntire described being, “swept into,” the band’s ecosystem. The band had many managers, but they gradually left, leaving McIntire in charge by 1970. His intellectual leanings and graceful demeanor set him apart from the raffish crowd which surrounded the band.

He guided the band through the release of *Workingman’s Dead* and *American Beauty*, roundly viewed as their most important studio albums. He also steered the band through their 1972 tour of Europe, their legendary jazz-infused 1973 tour, and the massive “Wall of Sound” audio system which toured with the band until they went on a touring hiatus in 1974.

After that, McIntire left the band, only to return in 1984. During this second stint as manager, the band saw its greatest commercial success with 1987’s *In The Dark*, which included the runaway hit single, “Touch of Grey.” McIntire left the band for the final time in 1990. He died in 2012.



The second arose from a chance meeting between a Bellevillian and a future musical icon. Belleville native Patrick Harvey shared his story which involves “rat burgers,” Mister Donut, and Jerry Garcia:

*In May of 1968, the Grateful Dead played their first shows in St. Louis, at the old National Guard Armory. My brother, Brian Harvey, and his friend John Barteau went to the shows, which were pretty low-key.*

*There was, essentially, no security, allowing attendees to wander around the venue and mix with members of the band. Brian and John struck up a conversation with Jerry, and in the course of that conversation learned that he had known John’s brother, Jim, the previous year, during Jim’s time in San Francisco.*

*After the show, the three of them decided to get into John’s old VW bug and come back over to Belleville to find Jim and another friend, who had been with Jim in San Francisco. They tried a few places, including the Barteau’s family home off of Smelting Works Road, but they had no luck.*

*By then the guys were hungry, and decided to hunt up someplace that was open. They settled on the Mr. Donut, on West Main, where another friend of ours was working the graveyard shift.*

*Around 4:00 a.m., they pulled into the driveway at our house, on Carlyle Avenue, so Brian could run in to get some money. They then headed out to Mr. Donut. Along with donuts, the plan was get some “real food”. So, they*

settled on the old-time hamburgers that were sold in plastic wrappers at Mr. Donut. They were heated up in the wrapper in a special toaster oven. Jerry was familiar with them, and referred to them as, "rat burgers." They grabbed the rat burgers and donuts, piled back into the VW, and got Jerry back to St. Louis in time for him to grab a little sleep.

### The Roots of R.E.O.

Though they first played in Champaign, R.E.O. Speedwagon included a Belleville native as a founding member. Keyboardist Neal Doughty grew up in Belleville and graduated from Belleville Township High School in 1964.

In 1966, Doughty met drummer Alan Gratzner at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. They decided to form a band. Looking for a name, Doughty tells that he walked into a class on transportation history. On the board was the name of truck called the REO Speedwagon. Doughty and Gratzner had the name for their band.

Doughty would go on to play on every one of the band's albums. He was also an early adopter of the Moog synthesizer. He's perhaps best known for his Hammond organ solo in 1978's "Roll With the Changes," and his piano work on "Can't Fight This Feeling," from 1984.

Doughty retired from touring with the band in 2023.

### Backing the Best

Born in Belleville in 1926, Marion "Buddy" Childers started playing the trumpet at the age of twelve. He played in the band and performed in



Neal Doughty



### Marion "Buddy" Childers

operas at Belleville Township High School. Just a few weeks shy of graduating in 1943, Childers dropped out of school to audition for one of his musical idols, bandleader Stan Kenton. Childers said of his audition:

*I was 16 I probably looked about 13, but I played considerably more maturely than that. 'Well, what do you want to do?' he said after that was over. 'I want to join your band.' 'But you're so young.' 'I gotta join your band,' I said. I had this thing in my mind that I had to join a name band at 16 or I'd never be able to make it as a musician.*

Kenton hired him to join his band, which led to a long association between the bandleader and Childers. Childers played with Kenton's band on ten albums.

Childers also became a prolific session musician. He recorded with everyone from Frank Sinatra to The Flying Burrito Brothers, from Sarah Vaughn to André Previn. He recorded ten songs with The Monkees and played on soundtracks with Quincy Jones, Lalo Schiffrin, and Elmer Bernstein. With the latter, he recorded the soundtrack for Otto Preminger's 1955 film, *The Man with the Golden Arm*.

### Good Neighbors Make Good Exhibits


John Wegrzyn and Will Shannon met by chance. John lives near the Victorian Home Museum, headquarters of the St. Clair County Historical Society. John and Will shared interests in music and local history. Their discussions developed into an idea for an exhibit which would celebrate Belleville's musical heritage.

Staging the exhibit at the Belleville Public Library, John began building the displays in the summer of 2022. Using items from his vast collection, John augmented the exhibit with items from the St. Clair County Historical Society's collection. Working together on the exhibit text, John and Will finished the exhibit in time for an opening in September of 2022.

The exhibit focuses on the years between 1950 and 1995. It explores people with Belleville connections who made it big. It also details local and regional acts who played everything from psychedelic rock to polka to punk to country and everything in between. It also features sections on radio stations, music stores, and concert venues. A noteworthy display includes sound mixing and concert audio equipment from legendary engineer Bob Heil from nearby Marissa, Illinois.

The exhibit is currently on display at the Belleville Public Library at 121 E. Washington Street in Belleville.

John hopes that this exhibit inspires others in Illinois and beyond:

*I hope this display could inspire other communities to research their own musical histories and create displays of their own. You never know, your next door neighbor may have been the drummer for a garage rock band and have plenty of stories and photos to share. *

John Wegrzyn, a Belleville native, is a lifelong audiophile and music collector.

Will Shannon is the Vice President of the Illinois State Historical Society and Executive Director of the St. Clair County Historical Society.



Exhibit creator and local music collector John Wegrzyn (far left) in conversation with legendary audio engineer Bob Heil (far right) at the exhibit opening in September of 2022.