

Don't Be an Economic Development One Hit Wonder

"One, two, three o'clock, four o'clock rock-
Five, six, seven o'clock, eight o'clock rock-
Nine, ten, eleven o'clock, twelve o'clock rock-
We're going to rock, around, the clock tonight..."

Now many of you in this room will recognize those lyrics as the original theme song to *Happy Days*- back when Stretch Cunningham lived at home and before Joanie loved Chachi, but most scholars (and yes, there are music scholars) would say that, "Rock Around the Clock" is the original rock and roll song.

And while to his dying day Ike Turner said that "Rocket 88" was the first Rock and Roll song, it's Bill Haley and the Comets' song that changed the music world forever, leading directly to Elvis, the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, and other rock gods.

The funny thing about Bill Haley and the Comets though is, that like a comet, they shone bright for a brief period of time, captivated the world, and then disappeared- never to be heard from again.

For those of you who remember the VH1 series, "Behind the Music", you will remember the trajectory of nearly every group featured - friends form band, friends write song, friends become famous...

And then the music stops. Sex, drugs, suicides, divorces, etc. all follow as we then watched, with morbid curiosity, those who flew too close to the sun fade into obscurity.

The term we as a society have coined for this phenomenon in the music world is the "one hit wonder". It's a phenomenon that happens so often there's even a wing in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland dedicated to these acts.

Moving forward from 1955, I'm sure we all come up with our own list of one hit wonders. As a person who came of age musically in the 1970s and 1980s, the ones that come to mind for me are:

"Too Shy" by Kajagoogoo

"Take on Me" by Ah-ha (who have their own exhibit at the Norwegian History Museum in Oslo)

"Tainted Love" by Soft Cell and;

"I Ran" by Flock of Seagulls

One of the most notorious one hit wonders is a band straight out of that flourishing center of rock culture - yes, Washington D.C. It's the band originally known as Fat City, or Bill and Taffy, and the same people who wrote "Take Me Home Country Roads" for John Denver, but once they paired up with two other friends, they became the Starlight Vocal Band.

Can anyone here tell me their famous song?

It's the infamous, "Afternoon Delight"!

Picture this- it's the summer of 1976, I'm five years old. We are about to celebrate the bicentennial of our country. And on the radio is this vocal harmony group singing what a five-year-old thinks is a song about fireworks, picnics, and hours spent by the lake. I loved that song so much, and would sing along as we would drive back and forth from our home in Richmond to our place on Lake Anna.

My parents, of course, had to keep straight faces throughout all of this, and if you know the song, you can imagine why.

Let's dive deep into the lyrics to understand why.

The song opens with this:

"Gonna find my baby, gonna hold her tight,
Gonna grab some afternoon delight,
My motto's always been "When it's right, it's right"
Why wait until the middle of a cold, dark night
When everything's a little clearer in the light of day
And we know the night is always gonna be here
anyway?"

And it just keeps going like that for three minutes of double entendre. And of course it went straight to number one.

Clearly we're not signing about our freedom from Great Britain but instead, what the band themselves in a 2018 profile in the *Washington Post*, referred to as a song about a "nooner"

As legendary DJ "Cousin Brucie" Morrow said in that article, "It was sort of a fluke number one. It was a fun, positive song we could whistle to - and it has sexual overtones that made everybody giggle. We needed that. Gerald Ford was president and Jimmy Carter was running; how much more boring can it get than a peanut farmer and a guy who hits his head coming into the White House?"

The song was up for several Grammys, but lost to "Bridge Over Troubled Water." The Starlight Vocal Band quickly recorded a second album to (capitalize on their success) that went nowhere and within several years, disbanded and never appeared again on the radio dial.

By now, you're probably thinking, "Well, that's an interesting and funny story, Chris, and we enjoy your music references, but this time you've gone too far - what the hell does this have to do with economic development and policy?"

The answer should be obvious. We all got into this business to make a difference in our communities. We all want to be the hero- turning around a blighted area, saving that factory, finding a job for that single mom, or helping a veteran to start a new business. We all want to hit the homerun. Pass that bill. Develop that mega site. Win the project of the year award.

So isn't that a bit like wanting to be a rock star? Do all the hard work and toil hoping for success. And then one day- bam- it happens. You're on top of the world. Everyone loves you. It's like *Cheers*- Everybody knows your name!

And sooner than you think, the world moves on. The next shiny object appears and you are left in history's trash bin. You are in danger of becoming a one-hit wonder.

So what do you do? There are 12,500 communities in this country. Do you move on to the next one to start over? Some certainly do. We all know fellow practitioners who one month say they found heaven in Hooterville and the next month are praising Petticoat Junction.

But that's not what VEDA's about. It's our goal to build the profession and you as a professional. And in doing so, we work to make Virginia a better place to live, work, and raise a family. And the core values of that effort have got to be intentionality and persistence.

Returning for the moment to rock music, when you think about the performers who have been around for decades- U2, The Eagles, Madonna, Stevie Wonder, Chicago- they all have these same values and traits.

They changed with the times yet still hold true to what got them in the spotlight to begin with.

When it comes to economic development policy and trying to keep the momentum going, we are caught in the cross currents of what's often politically expedient following a long-term strategy built on persistence and intentionality.

Think about it- some of our elected leaders are fine with being a "one-hit wonder". Two- and four-year terms do that to you.

And when you look at the struggles we've faced on the policy side the past few years, that short-term focus seems to prevail more than we'd like.

One hallmark that makes Virginia special is we are a state that lives up to our word. When we make a deal, almost always, we follow through. That requires long term commitment.

Unfortunately, often our political leaders do a good job of rallying behind a specific project or a specific site but then move on to the next shiny object. Call it control. Call it headline-grabbing. Call it short-sighted, but that's the situation we've sometimes got.

As Rob and Liz will review shortly, legislation and budget items tied to special projects- like the performance-based grants for Microporous or Micron- got through with nearly unanimous support. And those were big money commitments which are expected to yield big results.

But ask those same people to provide money for a sites program, or marketing, or to protect valuable tax credits- where it is unknown who will benefit and control is lost, and the support evaporates.

And Virginia is not alone. Louisiana's governor got shellacked this past weekend on a vote to make fundamental changes to economic development.

Yes, we got knocked around this session. There were some big policy wins, but there were also painful setbacks. Those who succeed long-term know that when knocked down, you have to get right back up, brush yourself off, and go at it all over again.

The one-hit wonders fail to do that. They are so either wrapped up in the glory that they fail to plan for the future or they let division and discord take over. And then they fade into obscurity.

So back to where we started, and to close out the song...

“When the clock strikes twelve, we'll cool off then
Start rockin' around the clock again
We're gonna rock around the clock tonight,
We're gonna rock rock rock, 'till broad daylight,
We're gonna rock, gonna rock, around the clock tonight!”

Da da da dum! Boom!