

The Purple Onion

The Purple Onion opened by six under-25 year old men including Barry Witkin, Sam Gutmacher and Al Lastman (brother of former Toronto mayor Mel Lastman), at 35 Avenue Rd., Toronto in early November, 1960, based on an advertisement posted Nov, 11, 1961 in Toronto Star: “Come and help celebrate our first anniversary this week”. For most of its time it presented that which we broadly call folk music, showcasing the best known of their day, up and coming talent and US performers moving through the city, some who came to be widely known. By September 1966 it was gone.



The Purple Onion, outside (left April 1965) and in (right 1965 with Val Pringle performing), with thanks to Cliff Martin for posting these photos to Facebook, March 2020.

Updated: September 12, 2022

1961

Apr 21	Ian and Sylvia	Advert in Star Apr 22 nd
Apr 22	Karen James and Damiano	Advert in Star Apr 22 nd . See also article in Sep 10, 1960, p.21 on Karen James: <i>Folk Songs Are Her Forte</i>
Apr 23	Jim McCarthy and Dave Wiffen	Advert in Star Apr 22 nd
May 5	Ian Tyson and Sylvia Fricker	Advert in Star May 5 th
May 6	Karen James and Damiano	Advert in Star May 5 th
May 7	Jim McCarthy and Dave Wiffen	Advert in Star May 5 th
May 12	Karen James and Klaas Van Graft	Advert in Star May 11 th
May 13	a "Top folk singing group"	Advert in Star May 11 th
May 14	Karen James	Advert in Star May 11 th
May 25	Klaas Van Graft	Advert in Star May 25 th
May 26	Karen James and Jean Guiseppe	Advert in Star May 25 th
May 27	The Pioneers	Advert in Star May 25 th
May 28	Damiano	Advert in Star May 25 th
Jun 29-Jul 2	The Courriers	Advert in Star Jun 27 th , 29 th , 30 th
Jul 22	The Pioneers	Advert in Star July 22 nd
Jul 23	Karen James	Advert in Star July 22 nd

Aug 30-Sep 3	The Courriers Fri & Sat), Al Cromwell and Doug Bishop (Thurs and Sun)	Star Sep 1 st p.18 display ad
Sep 15-17	Don Hackett and Jerry Raven	Star Sep 15 th p.36 display ad
Sep 22-24	The Sinners featuring Chick Roberts, The Tu (sic?) Tones (Fri and Sat)	Star Sep 22 nd p. 24 "A celebrity (Chick Roberts) within a group" Dave Caplan
Nov 11-12	The Courriers	Advert in Star Nov 11 th
Nov 17-19	Les Chandler Jr	Star Nov 17 th display ad
Dec 1-3	Miss Mollie Scott	Star Dec 1 st p.32 display ad
Dec 22-24	Doug Quattlebaum	Star Dec 22 nd p.13 "Gospel Blues: "First Time in a Club in Toronto" display ad
Dec 29-31	Josh While Jr.	Including New Year's Eve show, Star Dec 29 th

1962

Jan 5-7	(Ramblin') Jack Elliot	Star Jan 5 th p.23 "Singer of Woody Guthrie songs, mountain balladeer and comedian"
Jan 19-21	The Courriers	Star Jan 19 th "being taped for CBC-TV special"
Jan 26-28	The Sinners	Star Jan 27 th p.21
Feb 2-4	Len Chandler	Star Feb 2 nd and 3 rd , "Humor and Folk songs" "from Gerdes Folk City"
Feb 9-11	Jackie Washington	Star Feb 9 th p.23
Feb 16-18	Gene Farmer	Star Feb 16 th

Mar 8-10	Judy Collins	Star Mar 6 th , 8 th “America’s foremost folk singer” We could have seen her there for \$1
Mar 22-23	The Wayfarers	Star Mar 23 rd
Apr 5-8	Len Chandler	Star Apr 5 th p.24
Apr 12-13	Jackie Washington	Star Apr 12 th , 13 th
Apr 19-22	Josh White Jr	Star Apr 17 th , 21 st
Apr 28	Kell Winzey and Jim McCarthy	Star Apr 28 th
May 4	Logan English	May 4 th
May 10	David Crosby	Star May 10 th On Aug 8/19 Mike Daley Twitter tagged David Crosby with the question: “did you do a solo gig at the Purple Onion in Toronto in 1962?” Crosby replied “I think I did”
May 17-20	Jim Gavin	Star May 17 th P.27
Jun 1-3	Gene Farmer	Star Jun 1 st
Jun 8-9	Lenny Breau and Don Francks	Star Jun 9 th p.28 and Jun 11 th p.20 articles
Jun 22-23	Walt Coney	Star Jun 23 rd
Jun 26-30	Bob Gibson	Star Jun 26 th , 28 th p.24, 30 th p.29 (now air-conditioned)
August	Lenny Breau, Don Francks & Ian Henstridge	In a photo of them, referencing their recording live at the Purple Onion in August 1962, as posted to FB by Cliff Martin
Sep 1	Bob Grossman	Star Sep 1 st
Sep 5-8	The Courriers	Star Sep 1 st , Star Sep 8 th article emphasizing as on the 1 st they are not the “Couriers” from BC with one “r”

Sep 12-16	The Greenbriar Boys	Star Sep 15 th
Sep 19- 23	Bob Gibson	Star Sep 22 nd
Sep 26- 30	Mike Settle	Star Sep 22 nd
Oct 3-7	Rev. Gary Davis	Star Oct 4 th
Oct 10-14	Don Francks, Lenny Breau and Ian Henstridge	Star Oct 11 th and 12 th
Oct 24-28	Don Paulin	Star Oct 24 th , Oct 27 th
Nov 2-4	The Wayfarers	G&M Nov 2 nd p.27
Nov 16-19	The Courriers	Star Nov 16 th
Nov 30-Dec 2	Don Hackett and Jerry Raven	Star Nov 30 th
Dec 5-9	Instant Theatre featuring “The Looking Glass Players”	Star Dec 6 th
Dec 12-16	Steve Mellow’s Instant Theatre (held over)	Star Dec 13 th

1963

Jan 3-6	Val Pringle	Star Dec 27 th , Jan 3 rd
Jan 9-13	Don Francks, Lenny Breau and Ian Henstridge	Star Jan 8 th , 10 th
Jan 25-26	Daniel and Dmitri	G&M Jan 25 th p.35
Jan 30	Stanley Myron Handleman	Star Jan 23 rd
Jan 31-Feb 2	Rich Little	Star Jan 29 th , 31 st
Feb 6-10	Stanley Myron Handleman	Star Feb 7 th

Feb 6-10 or Feb 12-17	Buffy Ste Marie The Star Feb 7 th reports Ms St. Marie on the same bill as Stanley Myron Handleman. The Star Feb 8 th has her performing with the New Lost City Ramblers. The latter seems a more believable combination	Star Feb 7 th of Buffy Ste Marie: “ ... an attractive, young ... Mic Mac who calls Maine home. An enthusiastic performer with forceful delivery. Miss Saint Marie’s folk song repertoire included material she has written herself, children’s tunes and spirituals. One song, written since she arrived here - “The Universal Soldier” - she says is about peace or protest, depending on your politics”. This appears to substantiate a further Buffy quote cited in Wiki that the song was written at the Onion; possibly pinning down the timing to first week or two of February, 1963.
Feb 12-17	New Lost City Ramblers	Star Feb 8 th
Feb 20-24	Daniel and Demitri or The Chanteclairs	Star Feb 22 nd or an advertisement Star Feb 15 th p.22
Feb 27-Mar 3	Kit Snow	Star Feb 22 nd , G&M Mar 1 st p.5
Mar 8-10	The Wayfarers	Star Mar 8 th , 9 th
Mar 13-17	The Ivy League Trio	Star Mar 15 th
Mar 22-26	Stanley Myron Handleman	Star Mar 22 nd , 23 rd
Mar 27-31	Val Pringle	Star Mar 15 th , 22 nd , 29 th , Apr 5 th
Apr 5-7	Val Pringle	G&M Apr 5 th
Apr 10-13	Simone Dina	Star Apr 11 th
Apr (14)15-21, 24-28	Roosevelt Grier	Star Apr 11 th , 13 th , 19 th “all star tackle NY Football Giants”
May 1-5, 8-12	Mike Settle	Star Apr 26 th , May 10 th
May 22-26	Raun MacKinnon	Star May 16 th “Her current claim to fame is that she backgrounded Chubby Checker’s latest, 20 Miles.”

May 29-Jun 2	Mark Spoelstra	Star May 31 st from Wiki: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Spoelstra <i>"American singer-songwriter and folk and blues guitarist. He was born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri. He began his musical career in Los Angeles in his teens and migrated around to wind up in New York City in time to take part in the folk music revival of the early 1960s."</i>
Jun 14-15	Paul Clayton	Star Jun 14 th
Jun 19-23	Val Pringle	Star Jun 12 th , 22 nd
Aug 12-18	Ian and Sylvia	Star Jul 2 nd , p.16 Gerry Barker's In Town and Out column <i>".... sail out of the Mariposa Folk Festival in August (held 9-11) right into the Purple Onion."</i> Star Aug 13 th , p.18 <i>"The reasons for the success of Tyson and partners Sylvia Fricker and Eric Hord at Orillia were much in evidence again last night, as they opened a week's engagement at the Purple Onion. Their act was smoothly geared professional performing from first to last, despite an incipient sore throat on Sylvia's part. And they performed a Monday-night magic trick: they had a full house of young, attentive and enthusiastic patrons, even at the early show."</i>
Aug 21-25	Malka and Joso	An ad in Aug 21/63 Star and also noted in article in the Star: Aug 22 nd - Brock Peters was to have opened on Aug 21 st , but was delayed two weeks by other (film promotion) commitments
Aug 28-Sep 1	Malka and Joso	Star Aug 30 th
Sep 4-8	Brock Peters	G&M article Sep 6 th , Star Sep 6 th , and see also the Star Sep 7 th , 1963 p.22 article on the Purple Onion, its interesting start three years earlier and its owners. Alex Barris confirms these dates in his Telly column the Barris Beat on Sep 4 th , p.9

Sep 11, 12 & 14	Mike Seeger and the New Lost City Ramblers	Star Sep 6 th , 10 th
Sep 18-22	Leon Morense	Star Sep 20 th
Oct 2-6, 9-13	Carolyn Hester	Star Oct 3 rd , 10 th
Oct 16-20	Kettleby Creek Clan	Telly Oct 19 th , “blue grass”
Oct 23-27	Addiss & Crofut	Star Oct 23 rd and 24 th “stars of ABC-TV Hootenanny”
Oct 30- Nov 3	John Hammond Jr.	Star Oct 30 th , Telly Nov 2 nd
Nov 13-17	The Travellers	Star Nov 16 th confirms the Telly 16 th : which adds: “narrow and cramped but currently the best in town”
Nov 20-24, 27- Dec 1	Juan Serrano	Star Nov 21 st , 27 th , Telly Nov 23 rd
Dec 4-8, 11-15, 18-22	Malka and Joso	Telly Dec 7 th : “very professional, very hip and very attractive”, Star Nov 30 th for “3 weeks”, G&M Dec 13 th and 20 th
Dec 31	Brock Peters	Telly Dec 21 st : reopens end of the month with Brock Peters, with “New Year’s Eve special” \$3.50/person, confirmed by Star Dec 28 th

1964

Jan 2-5, 9-12	Brock Peters	G&M Jan 3 rd , Star Jan 2 nd and 3 rd , G&M Jan 10 th
Jan 17-19	Bob Carey	G&M Jan 17 th , Telly Jan 18 th “formerly of The Tarries”
Jan 22-26, 29- Feb 2	Val Pringle	G&M 24 th , Telly Jan 18 th “booming Belafonte protégé” Star Jan 25 th p.29
Feb 5-9	Allen-Ward Trio	G&M Jan 31 st & Feb 7 th , Telly Feb 1 st : “fresh from a western Canadian tour”

Feb 12-16, 19-23	The Courriers	Star Feb 15 th “now with Pamela Fernie “, Telly Feb 13 th & 20 th
Feb 26- Mar 1, 3-8	Mike Settle	Telly Feb 22 nd , 29 th
Mar 11-15	Carolyn Hester	Star Mar 11 th , Telly Mar 14 th
Mar 18-22	Carolyn Hester	Star Mar 19 th “The mad hatter Sammy Taft presents tumult type comedy between sets of Carolyn Hester at the Purple Onion this weekend.” confirmed by G&M Mar 20 th , Telly Mar 21 st
Mar 25-29	Anita Sheer	Telly Mar 28 th “Flamenco singer and guitarist”, G&M Mar 27 th . She had an interesting career: http://www.theflamencosociety.org/id19.html
Apr 1-5, 8-12	Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee	“2 shows a night Wed, Thurs and Sunday, four shows Friday and Saturday” (Star, G&M & Telly)
May 1-9	Gord Lightfoot	Telly May 2 nd , 9 th
May 6-10	Simon Sisters	Telly May.
May 13-17	Simon Sisters	Telly May 16 th “The folk singing Simon Sisters of <i>Winkin’ Blinkin’ and Nod</i> fame stay on until Sunday (17 th) also “The Frozen Onion at the rear (entrance on Yorkville) is also open for business” Star ad confirms opening May 14.
May 27-Jun 7	Buffy Ste Marie	Telly May 28 th : “holds forth until June 7 th ”
June 9-14	Bonnie Dobson	Telly Jun 6 th “Pure voiced folk singer”, “Also Banjo picker Bernie Keane” Telly Jun 13 th
Jun 16-21	Josh White Jr.	Telly Jun 13 th
Jun 23-28	Josh White Jr.	Star Jun 23 rd . Telly confirms Jun 25 th , Telly Jun 18 th , 20 th

Jun 30-July 5	Josh White Jr.	Telly Jul 2 nd
July 4 -19	Val Pringle	Telly Jul 4 th and 9 th

This several week break in the listings may have featured the Simon Sisters and Bob Gibson based on other references

Aug 15-23	Jo Mapes	Telly Aug 20 th : singer on the TV Hootenanny show around until Aug. 23 rd Telly Aug 15 th
Aug 24-Sep 6	Simon Sisters	Telly Aug 29 th , Sep 5 th
Sep 8-13	Mike Settle	Telly Sep 5 th , 12 th
Sep 18-27	Anita Sheer	Telly Sep 17 th , 19 th , 26 th “flamenco guitarist”
Sep 30-Oct 4	Carolyn Hester	Telly Sep 26 th
Sep 30-Oct 4	Shawn Phillips	Star Oct 3 rd (could be referring to next week, but Telly Oct 1 seems to confirm the Star)
Oct 7-11	Shawn Phillips	Telly Oct 8 th
October & November	Joni Anderson	Joni Mitchell’s website https://jonimitchell.com/ has her playing here in Oct. and Nov. of ‘64, specific dates not specified
Oct 13-25	Dave Broadfoot	Telly Oct 15 th “That Spring Thaw Man ... tells tales all this week and next, as a one man show at the Onion”
Oct 31, Nov 3-8	Allen Ward Trio	Telly Oct 31 st “there’s a hootenanny tonight then the Allen Ward Trio takes over”, Nov 5 th
Nov 10-16	Joe (Gilbert) and Eddie (Brown)	“with 16-year old NY folk singer Zaharia ” Telly Nov 12 th : joining them on the last weekend
Nov 17-29	Carolyn Hester	Star Nov 28 th , Telly Nov 19 th , 21 st

Dec 1-6	Leon Bibb	Star Nov 28 th , Telly Dec 3 rd
Dec 9-13	Gord Lightfoot	Telly Dec 10 th
Dec 16-20	Gord Lightfoot	Telly Dec 17 th
Dec 30-Jan 3	Mandrell Singers	Telly Dec 17 th , Jan 2 nd , Star Jan 2 nd

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Jan 6-10	The Travellers	Star Jan 2 nd , Telly Jan 2 nd , Jan 9 th
Jan 12-24	Zaharia	Telly Jan 14 th , 16 th and 21 st
Jan 27-31	Courriers	Telly Jan 14 th , 23 rd , 30 th
Feb 5-9	Joe and Eddie	Telly Feb 4 th , Star Feb 6 th
Feb 20-21	Jesse Colin Young	Telly Feb 20 th
Feb 24-28	Casey Anderson	Telly Feb 20 th , 27 th
Mar 19-21	Malka and Joso	G&M Mar 19 th
Mar 26-28	Malka and Joso	G&M Mar 26 th
Apr 9-11	Burns and Schreiber	Telly Apr 10 th comedy team "from Second City"
Apr 15-17	Bob Gibson	Telly Apr 10 th and 17 th ,
		At this point the Purple Onion joined the other houses and clubs that moved to Rock, R&B and/or Blues
Apr 30	Dee and the Yeomen	From the billboard in the picture on page 1 above, posted to FB by Cliff Martin

Jun 4-6	Luke & the Apostles	Telly Jun 5 th The Purple Onion goes Blues with Luke Gibson and the Apostles starting a year long residency
Jun 18-19	Luke & the Apostles	Telly Jun 19 th
Jun 25-26	RK (Roy Kenner) and the Associates	Telly Jun 26 th
Jun 30-Jul 4	Luke & the Apostles	Telly Jun 26 th , Jul 3 rd
Jul 9-11	Luke & the Apostles	Telly July 10 th
Jul 16-18	Luke & the Apostles	Telly Jul 17 th
Jul 23-25	Luke & the Apostles	Telly Jul 24 th
Jul 30-Aug 1	Luke & the Apostles	Telly Jul 31 st
Sep 3-4	Luke & the Apostles	G&M Sep 3 rd
Sep 17-19	Luke & the Apostles	G&M Sep 17 th
Nov 6	Luke & the Apostles	Telly Nov 6 th : "The Apostles and R&B band is in here for a long term engagement" Nov 13 th

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May 27	Luke & the Apostles	G&M May 27 th "At the Purple Onion for the eleventh week are Luke and the Apostles"
Jun 17	Luke & the Apostles	G&M Jun 17 th "Luke and the Apostles are in their sixth month at the Purple Onion"
Jul 8	Luke & the Apostles	G&M Jul 8 th "Luke and the Apostles are still at the Purple Onion", Star Jul 9 th
Jul 15	Luke & the Apostles	G&M Jul 15 th "Luke & the Apostles ... still appearing"

Aug 5-6	Willy John and the Wildcats	G&M Aug 5 th
Aug 12-13	The Press Gang	G&M Aug 12 th p.10
Aug 26	The Blues Faction	G&M Aug 26 th Band members included: Vic Semerjian, Hirsh Gardner (drummer).

None of the popular press lists their engagements after the above. It is said that the Onion closed because the owner forgot to pay the rent.

The building that housed the Onion was demolished in 2022 to make way for condominiums.

Data collection

This list is a composite of what appeared in the Toronto Telegram's What's Going On listing in the Showcase Section, October 1963 to late 1966 and the Chum About Town lists and Classified ads in the After Four Section (Feb 1964 - Aug 1966); augmented by online searches of the Toronto Star (Star) and Globe and Mail (G&M) archives from the 1960s, which provide useful information from the time before the Tely listings. It was still necessary as usual with these listings to interpolate when performances started or finished based on previous weeks line-ups. Where I take words directly from a listing I use "quotation marks". Where I take words from a column I credit the writer where possible.