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For Active Adults  
in the Rochester Area

## The World of Armand and Bruce

Owners of the House of Guitars  
share their incredible story

Q&A with County Executive Cheryl Dinolfo

# Electric Vibe

*House of Guitars in Rochester iconic in eyes of musicians, music lovers*

By Amy Cavalier

**W**elcome to Armand and Bruce Schaubroeck's empire, legacy and opus, the great House of Guitars.

Located in the old Grange Hall in Irondequoit and often billed as the largest guitar store in the world, it is literally packed to the rafters with over 10,000 new, used and vintage guitars ranging in price from \$60 to \$50,000. It also features amplifiers, drum equipment and other instruments along with a collection of vinyl records, cassette tapes, compact discs, videos and T-shirts.

Round it off with rock memorabilia including everything from a pair of Elvis' leather pants and John Lennon's military jacket to a Les Paul signed by Jimmy Page and a fiddle autographed by Charlie Daniels, and you've got a regular tourist attraction.

Over the past 50 years, brothers Armand, 72, and Bruce, 68, have gone from barely turning a profit to earning national notoriety. In July 1988, an Australian band set the record for "loudest pop group" at the House of Guitars, according to the Guinness Book of World Records.

In 1994, the store was featured on the big screen when one of the characters in the movie PCU wore a House of Guitars shirt throughout the film. In 2014, The Music Trades listed the House of Guitars among the top-200 largest music stores in America. That same year, HOG, as it's also known,

was inducted into the Rochester Music Hall of Fame.

Over the past 50 years, thousands of musicians have graced the stage, autographed a wall or merchandise in the store, hosted a music clinic or purchased instruments from the House of Guitars in Rochester.

## **Doris Schaubroeck's House of Guitars**

Long before the House of Guitars earned celebrity status and put Rochester on the musical map, it all began in their mother's basement in Irondequoit.

Armand, Bruce and their brother Blaine and sister Beryl were raised by their mother Doris who worked in a factory to support the family. Their father, a World War II veteran, was hospitalized in the Canandaigua veteran's center for most of their childhood.

Doris scraped together enough money to buy Armand an electric guitar, Blaine an accordion and Bruce a snare drum. Beryl got dance lessons.

"Blaine got gypped," said Bruce.

At 17, Armand was sent to Elmira Correctional Facility for over a year, plus another 18 months of probation, for his role in a school burglary. By 1964, the year the Beatles came to America, he had turned his act around and was working at Skip's Meat Market by day and selling guitars and art supplies out of his mother's basement by night.

Bruce, meanwhile, was holding down three paper routes, putting all the earnings toward the business.

"That was my share of the start-up money in the humble beginnings," he said. "I wouldn't spend anything; girlfriends and things like that, forget it. I didn't have time."

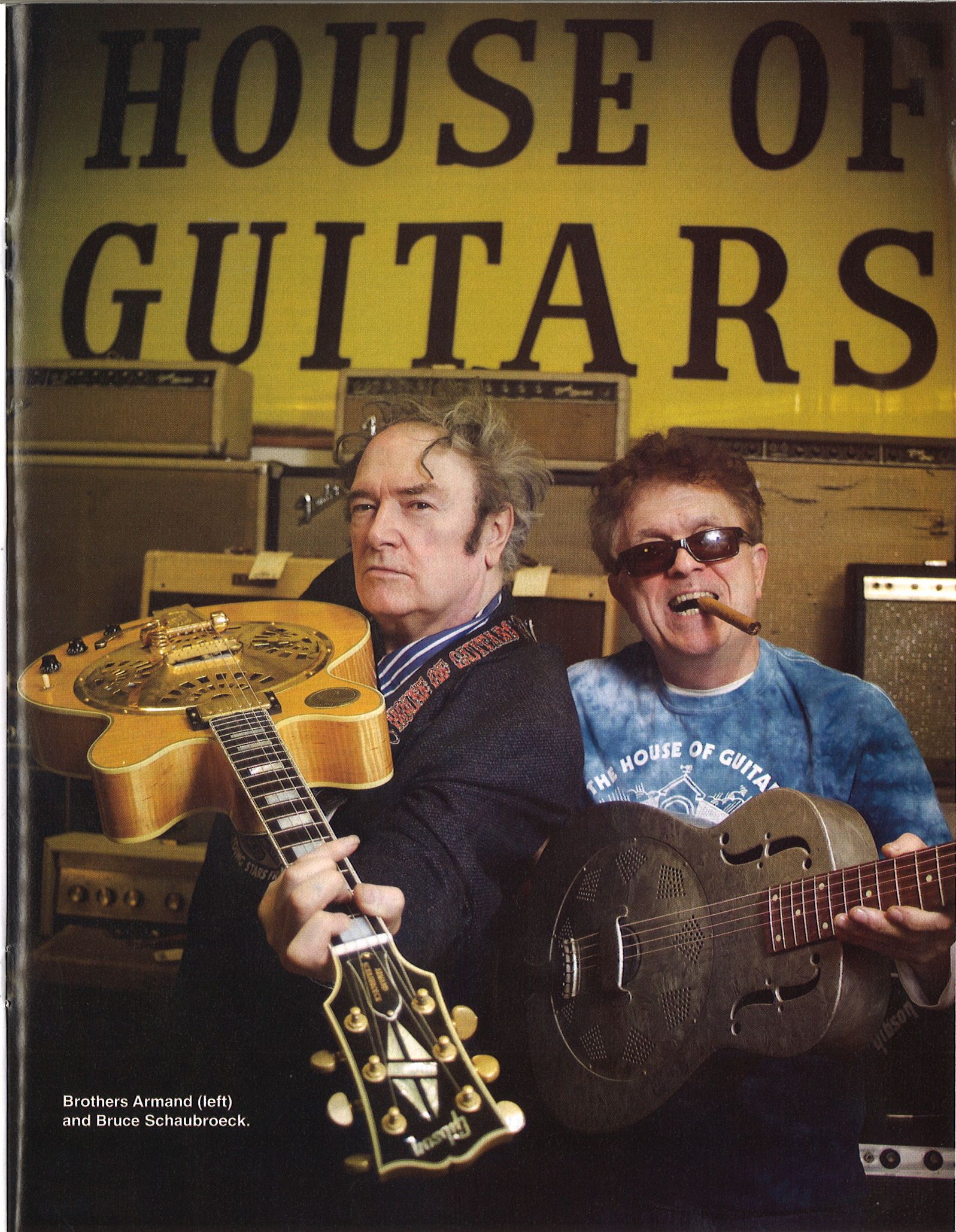
While their teenage friends were hanging out in their mother's basement, banging away on electric guitars and drums, Armand was upstairs meeting with musical equipment salesmen from Chicago and Boston.

"Riding on the coattails of the British invasion, we were selling a lot of guitars every night," said Armand.

The Schaubroeck brothers' small basement start-up was nothing like their competitors — music stores where instruments were kept under lock and key in glass cases and teenagers were not allowed in unless accompanied by an adult.

"The other music stores at the time didn't have anything for under \$300," Armand said. "We had guitars for \$30, \$50 and \$60. We bought lower-priced brands that were popping up all over the place and we had kids saving money and trading up all the time."

Armand and Bruce were catering to the growing wave of young aspiring rock 'n' roll musicians and electric guitars were about to explode. Armand recalls traveling to Syracuse on Trailway buses with a pocketful of cash for a shot at purchasing some



Brothers Armand (left) and Bruce Schaubroeck.

of the 20 or so Höfner 500/1 violin basses made popular by Paul McCartney being brought into the United States from Germany.

"I'd buy 12 or 13 of them and bring them back on the bus," he said. "I would stand from Syracuse to Rochester with a rope around me and all the boxes in the middle aisle. The bus driver would be grumbling that he should charge me more."

The Schaubroeck brothers were also the first to distribute Vox amps in the U.S., made popular by The Rolling Stones. Things were progressing well when the proverbial record scratched.

"Mom would come out of work, she'd be totally exhausted mentally and physically, and she'd see teenage kids all over her house and salesmen in three-piece suits with suitcases out; these sharks taking money from her babies," said Bruce. "She hit a breaking point and threw everybody out."

### Finding a home

By 1965, Armand's probation was up. He and Bruce established their first House of Guitars location at Clinton Avenue and Norton Street in a house with a big display window in it. Unable to afford the insurance, they would sleep in the store in the early years so no one would break in.

"I had a big piece of cardboard labeled 'Bruce's Posturepedic. Don't touch!'" said Bruce.

"We kind of slept behind the amps," said Armand.

The two brothers also saved money by relying on public transportation, cabs and walking. Armand has still not gotten a license. Bruce started driving in his 50s.

"When the store started, it takes full force," he said. "You've got no life. You've got to have 100,000 percent just to make it work."

In 1966, the store moved to a new location across from St. Michael's Church and the Hochstein School of Music, and in 1967, they relocated to Charlotte. Next door, they operated a coffee house called Black Candle and later Studio 9, where they recorded famous musicians such as Jerry Porter and Son House.

"Up until then, it just seemed like

we were living for free," said Armand. "In Charlotte, it seemed like we were starting to make some money."

In 1968, the brothers opened a second location at 695 Titus Ave. and hired their first employee. The Charlotte store closed in 1969 while another opened in Henrietta for a short time. The HOG landed in its current location in 1972, expanding over the years through the addition of three adjacent buildings. Initially, it wasn't an easy sell, though.

"We won on an appeal," Bruce recalls. "We had money on it since 1970. We occupied it in 1972. The Irondequoit town officials were nervous of us because we were young and we attracted hippies. A lot of the things they were worried about weren't true."

### Cooler than Hollywood

The House of Guitars began attracting famous musicians from the start, quickly earning a reputation as a venue that drew big audiences willing to spend money.

"The wall of autographs is getting so thick with signatures, it's hard to find room to write," said Armand. "Over the years, we've become really good friends with a lot of the bands."

The Schaubroeck's have shot television commercials with Ozzy Osbourne and the Ramones and Aerosmith once did a photo shoot for a magazine in the House of Guitars over a three-day period. The store was open, but the staff was told not to tell anyone, even customers in the store.

"We kept our word," recalls Bruce. "If people asked, we'd say 'you'll have to ask him'."

In November, the HOG hosted a free drum clinic featuring Lauren Hill's drummer James 'Biscuit' Rouse and its 19th annual drum clinic featured Shawn Drover from Megadeth, plus a drum contest for area youth. In December, Rochester-native Lou Graham did a book signing and free performance. The HOG also hosts free concerts outdoors on the I-Square Stage during the summer.

"We try to do stuff all the time to excite the marketplace and keep

it fun and keep everyone involved, so anytime you walk in here, we always have something going on," said Bruce.

Another draw is the collection of rare vintage guitars, many of which are not actually for sale.

"They're irreplaceable," said Armand. "Once something is no longer made, it just continues to climb in value. We've had Japanese companies in here wanting to buy every rare guitar. They would have bought them. They weren't concerned with the price. We just had to say no."

The House of Guitars caters to musicians of all levels, from those just starting off to those already established. The store features a music school, a recording studio and record label, as well as a stage located in the center of the guitar department which hosts live, free shows almost every weekend featuring both national touring acts and local bands alike.

"Most of the people at House of Guitars either want to make it in a band or become a recording engineer or DJ or something to do with music," said Armand. "They're the ones we usually hire because to them it's not so much work."

Tommy Brunett, a Rochester musician who has played with the likes of The Marshall Tucker Band, the Lumineers, ZZ Top and Modern English, said Armand and Bruce are supportive of the area music scene, providing equipment for bands at benefits and festivals.

"They make things as affordable as they can for musicians," said Brunett, who has worked at the House of Guitars and recorded on Armand's record label Mirror Records.

An artist himself, Armand also played in a few bands and produced a few records in his youth. In the 1960s, he befriended American pop artist Andy Warhol who agreed to listen to some of Armand's band's recordings. Warhol made efforts to produce an off-Broadway play about Armand's prison experience and later a movie, but everyone in the band worked at the store and could not devote time to Warhol's project.

In 1972, Armand joined with his



"It's been a lot of work, but we know nothing but hard work," says Bruce, left, with his brother Armand.

brothers Bruce on drums and Blaine on bass for a three-record vinyl album: "A Lot of People Would Like to See Armand Schaubroeck ... Dead."

"Musicians mean a lot to us because they're a lot like artists," said Armand. "They're going to do their music anyway, even if they don't make it and they hold two day jobs to raise a family, but their heart is into music and they'll never stop. That's why people should be kind to them. It's an up-and-down world."

### Family legacy

A typical day at the House of Guitars is a monthlong, Bruce said.

"Any plans you have, forget them," said Armand in all seriousness. "It's hard to plan. The shows or spontaneous people take you over. We have to like what we're doing or we'd be miserable."

There seems to be absolutely no logical rhyme or reason to the House of Guitars maze-like layout, but ask an employee and he or she will more than likely be able to find what you're looking for. Bruce's son Michael Schaubroeck, 28, said he thinks the store's haphazard inventory system is part of what appeals to musicians.

"Creating music is kind of a

messy process so when people come in I think they feel at home," said Michael. "It's not spiffy. It's grounded. It's real. It's rock 'n' roll."

Armand and Bruce estimate they have about 30 to 40 employees, counting family members. Among them is their youngest sister Beryl.

"I remember delivering meals to my brothers with my mother because they couldn't leave the store because they were working every minute," said Beryl. "I remember putting fliers on cars, whatever I could do to help."

Beryl started working part-time at the HOG in 1975 to save money for her college tuition. Now a retired schoolteacher and assistant principal, she still works part-time behind the register or processing invoices.

Whereas once she used to work at the store to spend time with her brothers, now it's to spend time with her nieces and nephews.

Armand and his wife Linda have four children and Bruce and his significant other Cindy have five children, many of whom who work at the store.

Armand's son Aric now films the commercials and helps maintain the House of Guitars' website and social media presence on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram along with Bruce's son Mi-

chael.

"It's impressive that the store's reputation spread as much as it did simply through word of mouth," Michael said. "Now it's easy to get the word out with the Internet. Uncle Armand and my dad did it the old-fashioned way and that's pretty remarkable."

The first five years of business were extremely risky, admits Bruce, spending and buying more than they could afford, and knowing family members thought they were wasting their money.

"Fifty years of doing all these hours, meeting people, being successful, making this empire out of nothing, without grants or contributions, no rich daddies, it's been a good one," said Bruce. "It's been a lot of work, but we know nothing but hard work."

Doris did get to see her son's dream become successful. She died shortly after the House of Guitars landed back home in Irondequoit. Armand and Bruce say there are no plans to retire, but if and when they do, they'll most certainly write a book.

"But the story ain't over yet," said Bruce.

# House of Guitars Mecca for Musicians

*Famed music shop in Rochester known for its wacky marketing tactics*

By Amy Cavalier

Cleveland has the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, Memphis has Beale Street and Rochester has got the House of Guitars," said Bruce Pilato, president of Pilato Entertainment Marketing and Media.

It's not unusual for bands like the Red Hot Chili Peppers to roll in while on tour and purchase a \$20,000 guitar or to receive an unannounced visit from Sheryl Crow looking for a deal on a Buck

Owens Gibson guitar, he said.

"It's like a retail museum of music," said Cheap Trick guitarist Rick Nielson of the House of Guitars in People Magazine in 1997.

"For a long time, they were rock 'n' roll's best-kept secret but now they're nationally known," said Pilato, who's brought bands such as Metallica and Mick Taylor of The Rolling Stones to the HOG. "They've had practically every rock star in the world in there.

To this day, there are still musicians who book tours so they can come to the House of Guitars."

Thousands of musicians, famous or on their way to being famous, from all ends of the globe have graced the stage, autographed a wall or merchandise in the store, hosted a music clinic, visited in-store to promote an album or tour, or purchased instruments from the House of Guitars.

Those artists include Metallica, Ozzy Osbourne, Matthew Sweet, Aerosmith, Jon Bon Jovi, The Ramones, Mötley Crüe, Billy Cobham, Louie Belson, Robert Cray, Joe Walsh, Matt Sorum, Shawn Drover, James Rouse, Buddy Guy and Jimmy Page.

Before Pilato founded his own company managing and promoting bands and artists such as ASIA, Emerson Lake & Palmer, Lou Gramm and the Sex Pistols, he got his start working at the House of Guitars at the age of 16.

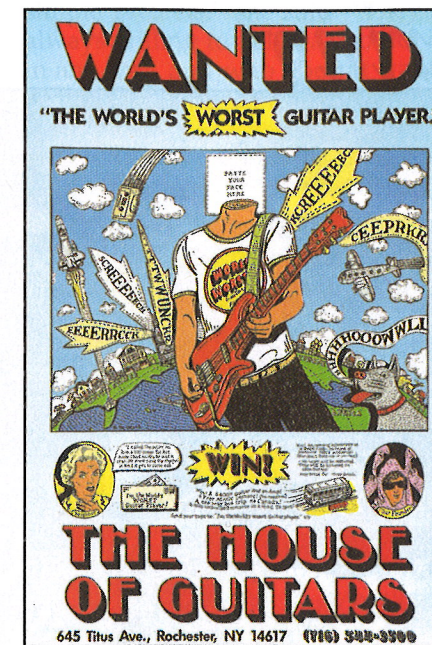
"It was the coolest place on the planet, the kind of people that came through," Pilato said. "One time I spent three hours helping Billy Joel test out keyboards. Peter Frampton would be there wanting to try out a vintage Les Paul and they'd ask me to take him upstairs and help him. And you'd get paid for it!"

### Avant-garde approach to marketing

The House of Guitars created a reputation for featuring an offbeat style of marketing that was creating local hype with eccentric and bizarre television commercials.

"They had two kinds of commercials — the ones you loved or the ones you could absolutely not stand, but no matter what the case was, you talked about it, you discussed it, and you wanted to know what it was all about," said Pilato.

A friend from England who worked for Kodak would come with a 16-mm camera and after a 12-hour workday, the cameras would start rolling. What they captured was wacky, fast and



strangely catchy. The local television stations weren't too sure what to make of the House of Guitar ads. Station managers would send the ad reps back to the store to question them about the commercials. "They thought everything meant something," said co-found-

er Armand Schaubroek. "Every word of the song playing in the background. They were over-thinking it. It was just a little chaotic. We weren't professionals."

Commercials featured unique characters such as a gorilla, the Easter Bunny and Mr. Tomato, intended to soften the House of Guitars "hard" image.

"We'd have a bubble machine going and he'd come out in a white suit with a red hat with a feather in it, wearing a tie that said cute tomato or a red bow-tie," recalled Armand. "He was kind of like our Winnie the Pooh. He softened our image."

The House of Guitars unusual antics and avant-garde cinematography captured the national spotlight and was featured on a 1980s HBO special on the history of advertising and innovative advertisers.

"They were doing stuff in the 1960s and 1970s that people didn't start doing until the 1990s in terms of marketing," said Pilato. "They were on top of the video aspect of marketing before MTV.

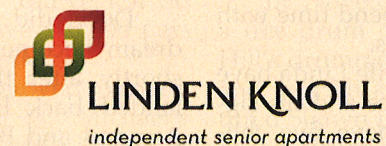
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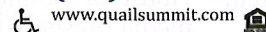


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