

This city has reason to crow

Ohio town
that launched
a thousand
jokes leaps
into the
limelight

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Special for USA TODAY

CLEVELAND — Out from under the rock of hard times, Cleveland is definitely on a roll.

And to celebrate its new status, the city that has spawned many a bad joke held an impromptu celebration Monday.

Several hundred people gathered outside the Burke Lakefront Airport in T-shirts and shorts to dance to rock's legendary *Satisfaction*.

Beer flowed and Frisbees flew. Radio stations covered the festivities live.

Inside, champagne and finger sandwiches were the fare for politicians congratulating themselves and their town. They'd just come back from New York, where Cleveland was officially named the future home of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

They were clad in painter's caps and shirts bearing the boasts, "Cleveland Home of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame" and "Cleveland We Won."

"It just proves one thing. If we can get our act together and work together, nobody can stop us," Mayor George Voinovich told the crowd.

"It's nice to be home in Cleveland, the all-America city, home of the first-place Cleveland Indians and home of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame!"

Referring to the city's all-out campaign for the hall, he added, "Those 650,000 signatures on those petitions and those 110,000 phone calls (to a USA TODAY hotline) blew 'em away. We did it."

Monday's announcement is just the newest reason to break out the bubbly and the brew.

The city of 540,000 on the Cuyahoga River has many other reasons to crow along with its mayor:

■ The Cleveland Indians, who haven't won a pennant

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Changes: Improved parks, politics

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since 1954, were in first place Monday in the American League — the first time since mid-May of 1981 (a look at the Indians, 6C).

■ Only last month, Cleveland copped its third "All-America City Award" from the National League of Cities. It's the only town to win three times — and it got all three in the past five years.

■ Construction worth \$2 billion is either planned or under way. It includes downtown and waterfront projects.

■ The Cleveland Orchestra expects a sell-out subscription series this summer. And it looks like another sell-out for the winter season. Critics say the orchestra is one of the world's finest.

■ The Cleveland Force, the city's soccer team, has led the Major Indoor Soccer League in attendance for two years. As many as 20,000 attend games.

All this has Cleveland going a bit bananas. Cleveland Indians president Peter Bavasi said Monday, "How sweet it is! If only the season would end this afternoon! I've got six ticket windows open and lines out to the street. We're looking good and we're feeling fine."

Sunday night, more than 300 fans showed up at the airport to welcome the league-leading Indians back from three wins over the Chicago White Sox. Usually, the team comes back to the sounds of silence.

"We all woke up to find the Indians in first place," says Rick Lester, spokesman for the Cleveland Orchestra. "And now the Rock and Roll Hall. It means the people outside of Cleveland are going to recog-

nize us!"

Some now call it the "Best Location in the Nation," but this city was once dubbed the "Mistake on the Lake." The river was so polluted it could be set afire, an inspiration for Randy Newman's *Burn On*. "Boy Wonder" Mayor Dennis Kucinich drove the city into default in 1979. *Saturday Night Live* lampooned "Cleveland Vice," and Johnny Carson regularly nibbled at the city's self-image.

One of the most-quoted jokes at the time: What is the difference between Cleveland and the *Titanic*? Answer: Cleveland has a better orchestra.

All that has changed. John Lanigan, disc jockey with station WMJI-FM, comments: "We can take jokes. It's not going to bother us now. I looked at the paper today, saw the baseball standings and thought I had the paper upside down!"

Some reasons for the transition from chump to champ: "The state of Ohio took over the waterfront parks, cleaned them up," says Norman Krumholz, director of the Center for Neighborhood Development at Cleveland State University.

Turbulent politics have settled down along with the river, Krumholz says. "There is a quieter tone of city government, a high level of cooperation at all levels of city and neighborhood groups." This cooperation has "led to the restoration of much of the downtown and to neighborhood projects." Also ongoing are low- and moderate-income projects, energy conservation measures and economic development programs.

The building boom has gone forward with both private and

public funds:

■ Cleveland plans a \$100 million domed stadium with retractable roof, and seating for 70,000 football and 50,000 baseball fans.

■ Tower City, a \$228 million hotel, residential and retail complex, is under construction downtown.

■ Sohio's \$200 million, 45-story corporate headquarters building opened April 19. And a \$25 million renovation of three theaters in Playhouse Square should open in the next couple of months.

■ Slots at the new waterfront marina, opened only last year, already are sold out.

One of the best building tools Cleveland has is its own people: What pushed the city over the top in the Hall of Fame competition was the persistence of its civic leaders and enthusiasm of its citizens, says Ahmet Ertegun, chairman of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation.

From the beginning, all segments of Cleveland rocked together campaigning for the honor.

Mayor Voinovich told a news conference in New York, before jetting home to well-wishers: "There was no question that Cleveland wanted it more than any other city."

The city's claim for the honor: disc jockey Alan Freed coined the phrase "rock 'n' roll" there in 1951. And the first rock concert was staged there in 1952.

And Clevelanders just worked hardest for the prize. More than 660,000 residents petitioned the foundation to locate the hall in their hometown. Enthusiasts rang up a 15-1 margin over second-place Memphis in a USA TODAY

poll asking readers to vote for one of eight cities. The city spent \$150,000 lobbying. And newspapers put the campaign on the front pages.

"Four years ago this city was in a paranoia of depression," says Jana Van Vliet of the Greater Cleveland Growth Association. "Today, people are optimistic. We've done a 180-degree turn-around."

They were turning around plenty at Monday's celebration at the airport. Two local Cleveland bands blasted rock 'n' roll favorites all afternoon.

"It's like a spiritual holiday," says Tim Spencer, 24. "I was born to music. My mom used to dance with me when she was pregnant. I had to be here for this."

Disc jockeys broadcast the festivities live. "For years, we've been kicked around," says Lawrence J. Travagliente, known locally as "Kid Leo." The Kid is on WMMS-FM radio, the city's No. 1 station.

"People are getting their pride back. They know now we won't be turned down because we're Cleveland. We got it because we're Cleveland."

Indian centerfielder Brett Butler also points with pride at his city. He recalls when he was traded from the Atlanta Braves to Cleveland in late '83: "I asked everybody, 'Is Cleveland really as bad as they say?' "They kept telling me, 'I don't care what you do, don't go to Cleveland. It will be the end of your career.' "

Now, he says with his best public relations grin, Cleveland is "a breath of fresh air."

David Zimmerman, Holly Spahn and Jerry Bonkowski contributed to this story.