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'Washington in the '80s': WETA's Take on the Decade of Barry and Reagan

BY ROBERT DEVANEY | NOVEMBER 13TH, 2014 | SHARE



(Photo © Michael Horsley)

1916 14th St., NW, 1988.

The 1980s in Washington, D.C., is the focus of WETA's latest documentary on local history of the nation's capital. The one-hour WETA production premieres 8 p.m., Monday, Nov. 17, at on WETA TV 26; it will repeat at 9:30 p.m., Saturday, Nov. 22, and 8 p.m., Wednesday, Nov. 26.

The Reagan Inauguration. The hostages released. Reagan shot. The Air Florida and Metro crashes of Jan. 13, 1982. John Riggins and the Redskins. Patrick Ewing and the Hoyas. Len Bias overdoses.

"Washington in the '80s" offers up the images and stories of President Ronald Reagan and Mayor Marion Barry as well as that of the Washington Redskins, Super Bowl champions in 1982 and 1987, and the Georgetown University Hoyas, winners of the NCAA basketball championship in 1984. Go-go and punk music made their splash in D.C., although not throughout all of the city. The local theater scene expanded downtown. And, yes, the use of cocaine was more than mentioned.

It is a fast-paced, broad-brush feature on the social, political and cultural changes of the 1980s that could have totaled at least two hours. The rehabilitation of the Old Post Office and Union Station are talked, but there could have more details on downtown D.C. and Georgetown. WETA has also produced documentaries on Washington in the 1960s and in the 1970s.

For the piece, WETA interviews included Barry and former councilmember and mayoral candidate Carol Schwartz, television journalists Maureen Bunyan and Tom Sherwood, radio journalist Kojo Nnamdi, political commentator Pat Buchanan, entertainment reporter Arch Campbell, former Redskins coach Joe Gibbs, musician Kato Hammond, former D.C. police chief Isaac Fulwood and architect Arthur Cotton Moore.

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The documentary talks up the good side of Barry with his summer jobs programs along with efforts to increase minority participation in government and business as well as his encouragement of business development -- the construction of Washington Harbour in Georgetown is cited. Besides the drug scrounge, the advent of the AIDS epidemic is underscored with a more open and accepted gay community in D.C.

Opening to sounds of "Funky Town" and headlining the optimism and energy of Reagan and Barry, "Washington in the '80s" ends the decade on a sour note as it highlights the crack cocaine crisis in D.C., which became known as "the murder capital of America" and whose mayor had to deny publicly that he snorted cocaine.



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