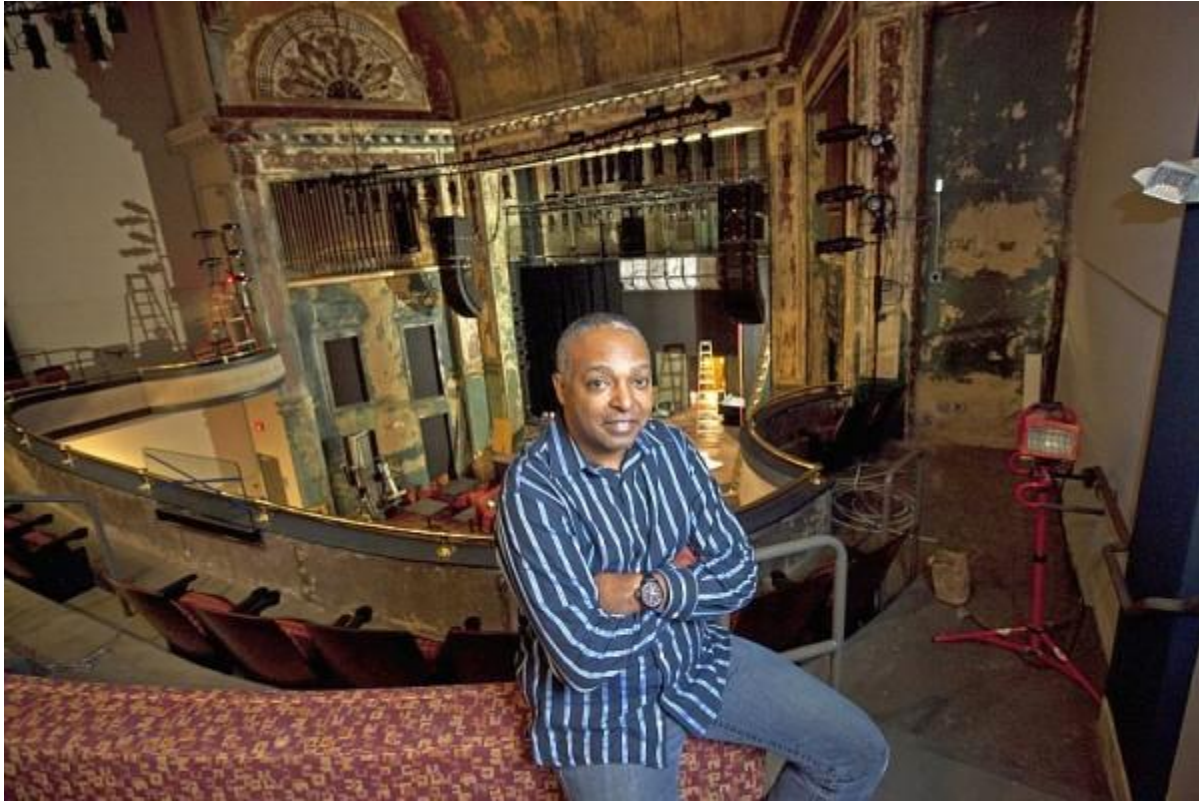


[The Queen's new man](#)

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above: Derek Newton, the new general manager for World Cafe Live at the Queen in Wilmington, which is opening two weeks from today.

It's going to take a really big star to walk through the doors of [World Cafe Live at the Queen](#) to rattle the venue's new general manager.

After all, [Derek Newton](#) was in charge of the BET on Jazz club in Washington, D.C, when President Bill Clinton went on stage with his saxophone on two different occasions during his presidency to play with jazzman Ramsey Lewis.

And he was managing the trendy Posh Restaurant & Supper Club during President Obama's inauguration with celebrities like Robert DeNiro, Denzel Washington and Marisa Tomei celebrating Obama's swearing in.

But none of that comes close to the wild scene in the mid-'90s at Motown Cafe in New York when Newton got word that the King of Pop himself, Michael Jackson, was going to visit the Motown Records-themed restaurant he managed.

Jackson had rented the entire second level with his hairdresser, and Newton and others had to sign a confidentiality agreement. Newton says he chose his most mature, grounded server to wait on Jackson, but purposefully didn't tell her who the special guest would be.

Soon, he heard a commotion upstairs and by the time he got there, his server was grounded, all right: she had fainted and was sprawled out on the floor.

“She went down hard,” says Newton, 52, still laughing at the memory. “It was pandemonium in there that night.”



above: BET founder Robert Johnson, a longtime employer of Newton, announcing last year’s sale of the Charlotte Bobcats to his friend, Michael Jordan.

Newton, originally from Paterson, N.J., will oversee a staff of about 100 part- and full-time employees at the Queen — almost all of which are from Delaware, unlike him.

As the opening of the Queen nears, Newton has been staying at the Residences at Rodney Square. Once things settle down, he will make a 180-mile, round-trip commute from his home in Columbia, Md., where he lives with his wife and two teenage children.

“They moved with me when they were younger and I just can’t do that to them again, especially my daughter, who has her whole gang of girlfriends,” says Newton, who graduated from Cheyney University in nearby Cheyney, Pa., where he studied business.

Newton started work at Marriott International and ended up as an executive with the company for 10 years in the New York City area. While there, he met the then-president of Motown Records, Jheryl Busby, who eventually offered him the job of general manager at the new Motown Cafe. Newton oversaw the opening of the 300-employee, music-themed restaurant, which was eventually sold to Universal.

While at Motown Cafe, Newton met a pair of future employers: Chris Blackwell, the founder of Island Records, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame member and career-maker for Bob Marley and U2 and Robert Johnson, founder of Black Entertainment Television and RLJ Development. Johnson is the world's first African-American billionaire.

Soon, Newton was working as a creative consultant for Blackwell, coming up with themes for several high-profile boutique hotels in Miami's South Beach, including Marlin Hotel, which features an on-site recording studio that has been used by artists like U2 and Beyonce, and The Leslie Hotel, which was used as a set for part of 1996's "The Birdcage."

After that, starting in 1997, he began his relationship with Johnson, working as his restaurant consultant and opening a string of Black Entertainment Television-themed restaurants in spots like Las Vegas, Orlando and Washington, D.C. and Maryland.

"Derek is one of the brightest guys I know in restaurant management and building engaging themes for customers," Johnson says. "Having Derek at the helm of this venue is going to be a very exciting thing for the people of Wilmington. He is absolutely first-rate."

Johnson, who has a summer home in Bethany Beach and has been spotted in the past at The Starboard and The Rusty Rudder in Dewey Beach with famous guests including Denzel Washington and Wesley Snipes, says he expects to visit the new venue soon.



ove: Newton working in his office in the Queen Theatre earlier this week.

In recent years, Newton worked as a restaurant consultant, including several properties in the Caribbean — Turks and Caicos, Saint Kitts and Saint Croix. As the economy tanked, so did the consulting opportunities.

And that's when he heard World Cafe Live in Philadelphia was expanding into Wilmington. Neil Sulkes, vice president of Real Entertainment Group, owners of World Cafe Live, and general manager of the Philadelphia location, says Newton was the clear choice for a general manager following a nationwide search.

“We liked his experience in opening new restaurants. His background is great at that and this is obviously a major undertaking — it's really like opening two restaurants and a banquet facility and a music venue. And we liked that he had a good corporate background, working for BET and Robert Johnson,” he says. “We just thought he would be a good fit.”

Sulkes says that he and World Cafe Live founder and president Hal Real also were drawn to Newton's past experience of opening restaurants in struggling or up-and-coming areas, like BET on Jazz in Northwest Washington, D.C. The idea is that he would fit well in downtown Wilmington, which is currently trying to foment its own renaissance.

“He knows what to expect and that was a major plus,” Sulkes says. “There were so many pluses on his side that it really was an easy choice.”

Newton says: “I have hope and optimism because I've seen change. If this thing is any sort of success, it will create that energy and buzz.”

As part of that push — and to make World Cafe Live at the Queen an arts “playhouse” for Wilmington, as officials have repeatedly stated — Sulkes confirmed that Market Street resident (and folk/blues hero) David Bromberg should be a somewhat familiar face at the Queen.

Starting April 11 and every following Monday, the venue will host the old 4W5 acoustic bluegrass jam on its smaller, upstairs stage that focuses on local music. The old 4W5 blues jams will start April 13 and will be held each Wednesday after. Bromberg will attend the informal sessions as he has in the past.

World Cafe Live at the Queen is Newton's 12th major project, whether it be opening hotels, restaurants or resorts and it shows. And a month after being hired and dropped into the middle of an ongoing construction project with an opening than two weeks away, he gives off a calm vibe as workers swirl around him.

“I kind of just roll with it and rely on experience and wisdom,” he says in his undecorated, sixth floor office atop the Queen Theatre, which he just moved into. “I'm nervous, but it's controlled.”