

# When DC's Red Lounge Caught the 'Black Panther'

The whole world has gone Marvel Comics crazy. The latest "Avengers" sequel smashed opening day and weekend records at the box office. Before that, "Black Panther" shocked the world by becoming the third-highest grossing film of all time in North America, appealing to a wider demographic than ever before for a "comic-book film."



By Teddy Durgin

**N**ot everyone was surprised, though. Back in February, Jason Kelley and Greg Jackson Jr. sensed a pop-culture phenomenon was about to happen and sprang into action. Their Washington, D.C.-based event production company, The Wave, put together a "Black Panther"-themed pop-up bar that was hosted at the Red Lounge on U Street in the nation's capital. It was only supposed to run one weekend. Interest was so high in the event, dubbed Enter Wakanda DC, that Kelley and Jackson extended it a second weekend the following Friday-through-Sunday.

"We realized very quickly that it was far bigger than our original intention," Kelley recalled, during a late April interview with the *Beverage Journal*. "Some people stayed at the pop-up bar for five, six hours. It definitely celebrated the moment, the movie, and our culture."

Jackson concurred, adding, "Pop-up bars are great because they invite people to experience entertainment, not just watch it. You can be in it and socialize in it. I knew how big 'Black Panther' was going to be for me and for Jason and, frankly,

for the entire black community as well as for comic-book enthusiasts. So, we started with the basic idea of 'We need to get together and celebrate this moment.' It started as just a Happy Hour. We were going to have a Happy Hour and then go to the movie afterwards. But there was a huge amount of interest around the Happy Hour ... more so than seeing the movie. So, that's when I called Jason and said, 'Hey, why don't we just run with this thing

and try to make it a full-out pop-up bar.' I'd been to so many that I knew the format from a customer side."

Enter Wakanda DC, which featured DJs playing hip-hop and Afrobeat on two floors of the Red Lounge, themed food and drink specials (the M'Baku shot, named after Winston Duke's heroic character in the movie, was especially popular), and art from local painters. Pages from the original "Black Panther" comic lined



Jason Kelley and Greg Jackson Jr. of The Wave, are the masterminds behind a very successful "Black Panther"-themed pop-up bar at Red Lounge in Washington, DC.

the walls. Additionally, there was a photo booth that gave fans an opportunity to take selfies with set props from the movie. Attendees were also able to get their faces painted like the Wakandan warriors from the film

Kelley remarked, "With every event, we try to give our friends and people in our community a platform to do the things they love. The pop-up bar manifested that in literally every aspect. Even down to the bar menu and the bar staffing. The staff we used was not the staff that was traditionally at Red Lounge. The actual staff was there on site. They cooked the food and worked with us throughout the process. But from the different drinks to the art itself, that was all locally sourced."

The story of The Wave is almost as interesting as the saga of the Black Panther. It was started two years ago in D.C. as a group chat. Kelley recalled, "It was a way to tell our friends where to go to brunch, to Happy Hour, and so forth. We first had 13 people in the course of a week. That went to 100 people, which went to 400. Now, we have over 25,000 users in about 25 different cities."

A George Mason University alum, Kelley spent five years working at CNN. He gave tours of the cable news network's Atlanta studios by day and worked in nightclubs in the evenings. While pulling that double duty, he developed the desire to create events connecting high-caliber people. He moved back to the Washington area in January 2015. For his part, Jackson's talents have previously been put to use as a community organizer and campaign strategist. After surviving an act of gun violence in 2013, he served as Mayor Muriel Bowser's Director of Community Relations &



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Services. He and Jackson connected at a brunch in March 2016 and hatched the idea for The Wave.

The Wave has gone on to host a number of black bar crawls in around the District of Columbia. The next event they'll be involved in is Freedom Day on June 16. The Wave will help present a new spin on the annual Juneteenth Barcrawl, with the entire U Street corridor taken over for the day. Multiple DJs will be placed up and down U Street, with drink specials all along the way.

Kelley concluded, "The challenge is gaining the trust of others to believe in your vision and be willing to take a risk on creating different experiences. When they do, it's very exciting." ■

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