

IN PERSON / The veteran rocker and long-time front man for Steppenwolf looks back 30 years to the time Toronto's Yorkville was a low-rent home to musicians, artists, dropouts, political activists and drug dealers, and a showcase for burgeoning stars like **Joni Mitchell**, Neil Young and, yes, John Kay

John Kay in retrospect

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CALL it coincidence, fate or, well . . . karma. But when John Kay, the veteran rocker and long-time front man for Steppenwolf (the group, not the Chicago theatre company or the Herman Hesse novel), peered out his hotel room window in downtown Toronto recently, he found himself looking right down the middle of Yorkville Avenue. It was the perfect vista, because it meant that John Kay had come home.

In town to promote his recently released autobiography, *Magic Carpet Ride* (co-authored with John Einarson), Kay can tell you all about Yorkville. Not as it exists today, with its haberdasheries selling \$1,500 suits and its chi-chi restaurants and boutiques, but as it was 30 years ago. That was when the district, located in downtown Toronto, was a low-rent home to a potpourri of musicians, artists, dropouts, political activists and drug dealers. Kay can still point out the locations of all the old Yorkville clubs, and tell you about the burgeoning stars — people like **Joni Mitchell**, Neil Young and yes, John Kay — who used to perform there.

"By 1965, Yorkville had exploded," he says. "There was The Riverboat and The Mousehole, The Devil's Den, Chez Monique and The Inn On The Parking Lot. Literally every third house on the street had been turned into something. It was a very important time and place, one where so many Canadians and non-Canadians could grow musically."

"I met so many people here — John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, Hamilton Camp, John Hammond. It wasn't just **Joni Mitchell** blowing through town or Neil Young coming here. It was a really vibrant scene, a wonderful time."

Kay, lean and, at age 50, still dressing the part of the hippie/biker/rocker, is an animated, articulate speaker. His speech patterns are a strange amalgam of his native German and the English-Canadian he learned in his adolescence, blended with traces of Good Ole Boy Southern, the last a legacy of the years he's spent in his pastoral retreat outside Nashville, Tenn. It's all rather like Arnold Schwarzeneg-



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(EDWARD REGAN/The Globe and Mail)

ger doing *Dukes Of Hazzard*.

Magic Carpet Ride traces Kay's life from childhood. As a youngster trapped in East Germany after the Second World War, he fled, in 1948, with his mother across the border and into . . . freedom, Western-style. Arriving in Canada in 1958, he lived in Toronto's High Park district and attended a special school for the visually impaired (hence the omnipresent dark glasses that were to become Kay's trademark in the late sixties and early seventies).

At age 13, excited by the sounds of Elvis Presley, Little Richard, the Everly Brothers and James Brown, he announced he would become a rock star. By 1965 Kay also had developed an affinity for folk music and the blues and had started his first band, The Sparrows.

Leaving Toronto in 1966, The Sparrows went to California. After paying dues in the clubs along Los Angeles' Sunset Strip, Kay and company, now called Steppenwolf, hit the big time in 1967 with *Born to Be Wild*, followed by a bevy of other

successes, including *Magic Carpet Ride*, *Rock Me and Monster*.

But with the fame came all the other trappings of the rock 'n' roll lifestyle of the era: the drugs, the groupies, the profligate ways. And while Kay's autobiography tends to shy away from the sensational (opting instead for a more straightforward historical approach to Steppenwolf's recording career), he wisely includes enough prurient material to provide any reader with a strong sense of the times and the lifestyles. Consider this:

"We were staying at the Four Seasons Hotel in Toronto, and Jerry Sloan our road manager came to my room in a panic. 'John, I don't know what to do. Come here.' We went down the hall and there was Hugh's room with the door wide open. Hugh was out cold, wrapped up in a lone bedsheet like a mummy in a fetal position. On the night table next to him was evidence of a night of ingesting chemicals, with a couple of amphetamines lying there."

"Jerry shook Hugh, threw water

on him, anything to get him to come around. All he got was a few groans. We had to catch a plane, so Jerry took the two amphetamines, put them in an ashtray, crushed them into a powder, fashioned a tube out of a piece of paper, and blew them up each of Jerry's nostrils. A few moments went by, and finally one eye partially opened."

In these ostensibly conservative days, Kay says he "really had no problems dealing with the ramifications of putting [stories like that] in print. Perhaps at an earlier point in my life I would have, but after five years of living in the hills of Tennessee, I've matured. That stuff is all a part and parcel of what I am, of what made me the way I am today."

"Some of the traumatizing things that happened to me, I think in the long run built more character. They gave me a sense of perspective, the ability in hard times to say, well, if I survived that, I can survive anything."

Today, of course, mention Steppenwolf to the average rock music

fan and the immediate response is *Born to Be Wild*, a song that still makes radio listeners crank the volume dial up, way up, at the same time that it's an aural cliché for the *Easy Rider* generation in particular, and youth culture in general. While Kay acknowledges that the tune has at least kept him working all these years, putting various Steppenwolfs on the road, he is also aware of the down side of being identified too precisely with one song. (It was, in fact, written by Mars Bonfire, nom de plume of Dennis Edmonton, a guitarist and brother of Steppenwolf's keyboard player, Jerry.)

"People do tend to grab at it as an easy handle," Kay admits. "It's a quick thing, identifiable. But we're in the age of the sound bite and the short attention span, after all. It's something I have no control over, so instead of shying away from it, I've chosen to understand that the song is part of my past, but that the past can be our ticket to any kind of a future. It is for the moment what is of rare-queen value, and what pulls the people in."

"And," he continues, "we'll give them those tunes, but we'll use them to introduce the new stuff we've been writing and recording. I remember talking to Jimi Hendrix in the late sixties. He was getting really pissed off about the fans' constant demands for *Foxy Lady* and *Purple Haze* all the time. But I told him, man, you've got to throw them a bone, because in three minutes you can have them on your side for the rest of the night."

While Kay and whatever Steppenwolf ensemble he chooses to form no longer rule the pop charts as they did 25 years ago, the band continued to be an impressive live draw and an occasionally potent recording act. Last year Kay hosted a sort of festival/get-together for The Wolfpack, his longstanding fan club, which drew devotees to Tennessee from as far away as Europe and Asia.

With the days of drugs and fast-food sex ("I got used to having my Kate and Edith, too") long behind him, Kay maintains a close relationship with Jutta, his wife of nearly 28 years, and their daughter, Shawn.

"Despite turning 50, I've never considered retirement. I think I'll always have a hand in music in some way. At this juncture of my life, I'm about as satisfied as I ever have been."