

STEPPENWOLF



Steppenwolf on The Ed Sullivan Show. Photo: Courtesy of Steppenwolf

Born To Be Wild was the band's signature tune, but it could also be the title of the Steppenwolf story. It's a tale that began in Toronto's Yorkville district, continued with triumphs and failures in New York, a crazy drive across America to California, hanging out in San Francisco in the summer of love days, and success with tunes embraced by rockers, bikers, and teenagers the world over. Unfortunately, it's also a story of management problems, changing personnel and a less than amicable break-up.

Bass player and former Scarborough, Ontario resident Nick St. Nicholas said the band was "more or less just existing" when *Born To Be Wild* hit the charts and etched Steppenwolf's name in rock 'n' roll history. North American tours and national shows such as *The Ed Sullivan Show* followed soon after. St. Nicholas got his start while a student at R.H. King Collegiate and Cedarbrae Collegiate in Scarborough where he formed what he believes was that school's first rock 'n' roll band. After a stint at the Ontario College of Art, he played in The Big Town Boys and later The Mynah Birds, the band that would later help launch Neil Young. St. Nicholas then moved over to The Sparrow, the band that backed up Oshawa, Ontario pop singer Jack London and scored Canadian hits such as *If You Don't Want My Love*.

However, a dispute with London led to the band striking on its own with new member John Kay, who was more of a blues musician. "We were walking around outside the Avenue Road club, and I ran into John Kay," recalled St. Nicholas, who was living in Minneapolis, Minnesota when we talked with him.

"Somehow we got together and he started singing and playing and I loved the sound." Not content to play the usual Top 40 tunes, the band moved to New York, played some important gigs, and recorded an album that had little success. With only a short time left on their visas, they packed their guitars into a U-Haul and drove non-stop to Los Angeles to find work. When the gigs ran out in L.A., the band moved north to San Francisco and played with the likes of Moby Grape, The Doors and Jefferson Airplane. Immigration officials, who had been sent looking for

St. Nicholas by his parents back in Scarborough, threatened to send band members back to Canada, but an extension was granted. After some local success, and a name

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change to Steppenwolf, the song *Born To Be Wild* hit the charts. St. Nicholas said band member Dennis Edmonton (a.k.a. Mars Bonfire) wrote the song one night after a motorcycle ride into the city. Some guy started hassling him about his long hair, and Bonfire punched him out, stuffed him into a telephone booth and roared off home.

The song, used in the movie *Easy Rider* (and several other films since) has subsequently become an anthem of bikers and free-roving travellers everywhere. But here's the irony: Bonfire had never driven a motorcycle in his life until that fateful night, St. Nicholas said.

Steppenwolf followed up with two other Top 10 songs, *Magic Carpet Ride* and *Rock Me* and a string of other charted tunes. "There were so many things going on, it was just like a job which demands 100 per cent of your time," said St. Nicholas of those years. "You don't really have time to figure out how you made it." Personnel changes and disagreements on the group's future direction were among the causes of the breakup. Kay kept the band going for a few years and then reorganized it with new members in 1980.

The new Steppenwolf released an album in the late '80s and toured North America. When contacted at his Los Angeles home around that time, Kay declined a where-are-they-now interview saying, "we don't really think of ourselves as a nostalgia act." He said the then-new Steppenwolf is "doing well enough to have our foot back in the door." And they certainly have. According to the website, <http://steppenwolf.com/>, Kay and Steppenwolf (with different members from the original group) are still going

strong today playing 10 to 12 concerts a year. Kay spends much of his time on wildlife conservation and human rights causes.

Mars Bonfire and his brother Jerry Edmonton were also living in L.A. then and working in the music business. According to a Toronto Star article, Bonfire was working as a Sierra Club guide to southern California mountain peaks in 2008, and in 2015 Men's Journal magazine did an interview with Bonfire because he had just climbed the 300 mountain peaks surrounding Los Angeles for the 25th time — an interesting accomplishment for a guy who penned the line “we can climb so high” in *Born To Be Wild*. Jerry Edmonton died in a car crash in 1993.

Keyboard player Goldy McJohn was living on the west coast and was given permission by Kay in 2010 to perform as a band called The Magic Carpet Ride, while another early bass player, Rushton Moreve, had also died in a car crash in 1981. St. Nicholas took up acting in the '70s, played for a reunited (minus John Kay) Steppenwolf later in that decade, and then wrote, produced and headed a Minneapolis-based band The Wolf. The band played at a lot of motorcycle rallies such as the Daytona Beach Bike Week. He formed the band World Class Rockers in 1995 that includes former members of Boston, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Journey and others that is still going strong. Read more about them at <http://www.wcr.com/>

“I like playing music and I think I've got a lot of years to go,” St. Nicholas said back in the '80s. “A lot of people tell me you can only be a rock musician until you're 25 or 30 years old and then you've got to quit. Why? Where's the boundary?”