

THE UGLY DUCKLINGS

They looked like The Rolling Stones, they once copied The Rolling Stones on stage and credit for their early popularity must go to The Stones.

But as history would have it, The Ugly Ducklings and their brand of raunchy Toronto rock never neared the phenomenal success or musical longevity of Mick Jagger and his band of English rockers.

The Stones are still around many decades after scoring their first hit. But back in the '60s, The Ugly Ducklings were lucky to last 2-1/2 years.

While their stardom may have been short lived, for a time The Ducks were on top of the Toronto bar and high school dance scene gaining significant followings in southern Ontario, Winnipeg and eastern Canada.

It started with a talent show at Cedarbrae Collegiate in the Toronto suburb of Scarborough in March 1965, when they appeared as the Strolling Bones, a takeoff on the Rolling Stones. Also on the amateur bill that night was Nick St. Nicholas, later of Steppenwolf.



The Ugly Ducklings at a 1986 reunion show. Photo: Mark Kearney

Dave Bingham, lead singer at the time, remembers the evening:

"We had long hair and we looked like The Stones. Our whole first set was Stones and Buddy Holly stuff and we had the girls screaming and throwing stuff. The response was so overwhelming we went on the road."

The group, all students at Cedarbrae at the time, changed drummers and soon became one of Canada's best "garage" bands, so named because of their raw and energetic style. Up front on lead vocals was Kamloops, British Columbia native Bingham, alongside guitarists Roger Mayne and Glynn Bell (who looked much like late Rolling Stone Brian Jones), bassist John Read and drummer Robin Boers.

On the road they gradually abandoned their Stones style and began writing original material. Their first single, *Nothin'*, was recorded in June 1966, at a cost of \$320 and won the Battle of the New Bands contest on CHUM radio in Toronto five times in a row, leading to a performance at Maple Leaf Gardens where The Ugly Ducklings opened for, who else, but The Rolling Stones. The song hit No. 20 on the CHUM Chart and sold about 5,000 copies.

The band later went to New York to record a second single *She Ain't No Use To Me*. Another single, *Just In Case You Wonder*, highlighted by a searing lead guitar solo, came later. Give the song a listen at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3r_K83qj8E

In 1967, The Ugly Ducklings released the album *Somewhere Outside* and a few months before splitting, Bingham recorded the single *Gaslight*, backed by a 17-piece band, including 11 musicians from *The Tonight Show*.

"Our record company wanted the band to use other musicians on the record to give us a better chance to get a U.S. record deal. We said 'no.' Later, I was lured to New York to do a jingle recording and once in the studio, they showed me the song and I couldn't resist," says Bingham, who later in life would work as a carpenter and auto mechanic in Fenelon Falls, Ontario, and for a time helped Peterborough, Ontario band Loose Change produce a demo tape before moving to California where he continued to perform. He later moved to Mexico, where his Facebook page in 2017 said he was still performing.

Gaslight was written by a New York cab driver and contained no input from other members of The Ugly Ducklings but became the group's biggest single, reaching No. 1 on CHUM for three weeks and selling about 25,000 copies. Bingham insists the other Ducks had no hard feelings and said it had nothing to do with the band's split in December 1967.

Read, who later worked as a regional manager for Blacks Cameras in Toronto, was first to leave the group.

"The fun went out of it. It became more like a business," he recalled, but "I wouldn't have missed it for the world. I miss being in (The Ugly Ducklings) when I hear a band that's almost good because I want to pass along some advice."

The Ducks were revived on a number of occasions, including a gig with all five members in 1979 but folded for good in 1982. Read was also first to leave that edition of the band.

In 1980, the group recorded *Off The Wall*, an LP that sold about 3,500 copies. In 1981, their third album, a greatest hits collection, was released. Collectors in the '80s said it was worth \$200, if it could be found. Over the years other compilations of their music have been released.