

REBEL WITH A CAUSE

He sang the psalm that became an anthem for generations and put the term “heavy metal” on plastic. But there is much more to **John Kay** than *that STEPPENWOLF* song, says Joe Geesin



Steppenwolf with John Kay (top left)

In 1968, *Born To Be Wild* became the rebel song for a generation, entering popular culture the following year with its use in the counterculture film *Easy Rider* during that iconic scene featuring Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper riding motorcycles on the open highway. The song went on to both inspire and name a whole genre of rock music.

The crunchy yet catchy riff and gruff, punchy vocals have influenced many and gave 1968's rock'n'roll a new, hard-edged, lease of life. *Born To Be Wild* has since been covered by the likes of Blue Öyster Cult, Status Quo, The Cult, Raven, INXS, Slade and, er, The Muppets, as well as by almost every covers band around the world; it's a song that almost everyone will know, possibly without realising it.

For Canadian-American band Steppenwolf, led by the upfront growl of singer and founder member John Kay, it was their third single and took off *before* its inclusion in the film, peaking at No 2 in the *Billboard* charts. Yet the film cemented the band's place in history and led to Steppenwolf being labelled a biker metal band. Now, over 40 years on, the track is still regularly played on TV and radio whenever motorcycles are discussed or shown.

Singer John Kay, who fronts the band to this day, was born in a part of Germany known then as East Prussia. Fleeing to East Germany at the end of World War II, and then to West Germany, this is where the young Kay grew up and discovered his passion

for music through the radio. A move to Toronto as a teenager allowed his dreams to become reality and, in 1966, he joined The Sparrows (later The Sparrow), who released two singles (a third accompanied a compilation to cash in on Steppenwolf's subsequent success).

Relocating to America's West Coast, 1967 saw the formation of Steppenwolf, named after the Hermann Hesse novel which was required reading in the counterculture of the time. The band's sound retained the blues roots but moved to a harder upfront and slightly psychedelic West Coast direction with succinct punchier songs; a proto rock/metal sound that, alongside the likes of Vanilla Fudge, Blue Cheer and Iron Butterfly, would help shape the 70s heavy metal scene.

Alongside Kay were former Sparrow drummer Jerry Edmonton and keyboard player Goldy McJohn; the band were completed by bassist Rushton Moreve and guitarist Michael Monarch. The band signed to ABC Dunhill and recorded their eponymous debut in less than a week.

That album features the legendary *Born To Be Wild*, which was written by former Sparrow guitarist Dennis Edmonton

(drummer Gerry's brother), under the pseudonym of Mars Bonfire. As well as later being included in the 1969 film and becoming the band's signature tune, it is famous for the line “Heavy metal thunder”. This reference to the sound of a roaring motorcycle could equally encapsulate the band's sound. That line is also widely recognised as the first reference to heavy metal in music (there was a *Heavy Metal Kid* in William Burroughs' novel *The Soft Machine* some years earlier). *Born To Be Wild* is

widely cited as subsequently labelling the genre, and while the debate will no doubt continue, it is one that Kay himself refuses to be drawn into. The debut album also featured a cover of Hoyt Axton's anti-drugs song *The Pusher*, which mixed folk with heavy psychedelia. This also appeared in *Easy Rider*, accompanying a scene showing drug trafficking.

Steppenwolf toured heavily and soon released *Steppenwolf The Second*, which featured the hit single *Magic Carpet Ride*, which was accompanied by one of rock's first videos. From the same album, *Don't Step On The Grass Sam* was one of Steppenwolf's first overtly political songs, the Sam in question being Uncle Sam.

In 1969 Steppenwolf continued the high workrate with the album *At Your Birthday Party* (featuring the hit *Rock Me*), while Dunhill also released a live album, *Early Steppenwolf*, which was actually recorded by The Sparrow in 1967. The band also contributed two songs to the *Candy* soundtrack (Stateside (S)SL 10276, £30).

At the end of the year *Monster* was released (the UK release was a month or two later), one of the band's most politically motivated efforts. The title track refers to the government, and the self-explanatory *Draft Resister* remains another live favourite. *Monster* was a musical highpoint for the band, while the *Steppenwolf Live* album also sold well. The live set was recorded at one show, which Kay recalls imposed limitations on the release – in terms of both quality and length. Two or three tracks were recorded live in the studio and added to bolster the release, with a canned audience. This is a tactic many bands have employed on live albums since, though some don't own up to it.

Steppenwolf 7 was another well-received album, but line-up changes and the pressures of recording and touring were taking their toll and the band split soon after the 1971 feminist-inspired *For Ladies Only* LP.

John Kay recorded two well-received solo albums; the first, *Forgotten Songs And Unsung Heroes*, featured a mix of covers of tracks that had inspired Kay, and boasts some of Kay's best work.

Re-energised, Steppenwolf reformed,

toured almost constantly, which meant the opportunities to record were sporadic and, even then, albums were recorded quickly.

Throughout the 80s, 90s and 00s, Kay has kept the Steppenwolf name alive and continues to record and tour. In 1997 a successful joint headline tour with Blue Öyster Cult, Foghat and Pat Travers spawned the live album *Summerdaze* (CMC/BMG 06076-86213-2), featuring three tracks by each artist.

The current incarnation of the band has also found an element of stability, and continues to draw sizeable crowds. Yet, despite the strength of the more recent material, every set, like every compilation, will continue to include *Monster*, *Sookie Sookie*, *Rock Me* and, of course, *Born To Be Wild*. The latter is what the band will always be remembered for, but no one likes to be pigeon-holed. Don't be fooled: with plenty of other hits, covering rock, psychedelia and blues, Steppenwolf's catalogue is well worth exploring.

Here, in a rare interview, John Kay takes us on a *Magic Carpet Ride*.

RC: Steppenwolf will always be associated with *Born To Be Wild*. Were you surprised by its success?

John Kay: Yes, because it was our third single and there was a real disagreement over what the single should be. We and our management wanted *Born To Be Wild*, and the label wanted to release *Everybody's Next One*, so we compromised and put that out as the B-side. And when they sent it out to radio stations, there was no directive over which track to play. About 70 per cent went with *Born To Be Wild* and it took off from there. But if it wasn't for its inclusion in the film *Easy Rider*, it maybe wouldn't have the iconic status it does now.

***Born To Be Wild* has entered popular culture and is still regularly played over shots of motorcycles. Does that surprise you?**

No, not now, as *Easy Rider* became a touchstone of the biker community. So that scene with Dennis Hopper riding a bike on the open highway enshrined the song. People get distracted from the meaning – with *The Pusher* too – of the band [what they stand for]. Like *Monster* was a protest album which

“We’ve survived and thrived in an industry that eats its young”

signing to the CBS-owned MUMS label for two excellent albums and a third that was effectively a contractual obligation. For these three albums, the band featured guitarist Bobby Cochran, nephew of rock pioneer Eddie. Then they split again and John Kay slowed his workrate, recording the solo album *All In Good Time*.

With the Steppenwolf name not in use, former members of the band started touring under that banner. There were at one point two touring bands with the same name, and a promoter tried to sign one of them for an album. This resulted in Kay going out as John Kay And Steppenwolf in 1980, so fans knew which was the genuine article. The band

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appealed to college students. You see: wide audiences, there's more to us than Born To Be Wild. But the bikers grew up and became yuppies who rode their bikes at weekends. And we've played bike events all over the world. When we played Brazil, people there knew all our songs, not just that one; people who were too young to have heard our stuff first time round.

How do you feel about the song now?

Well, I don't sit at home singing it. It does continue to be popular; it has a teenage ethic, it appeals to teenagers of all generations. The audience show energy and enthusiasm and I can't help but be affected by that. If I wasn't moved by their energy we wouldn't play it. It's aged well.

It's been played so often you must have wished you'd written it.

Of course, it would have meant lots of additional income, but I'm not greedy. I've written lots of other songs that were hits, I've been fortunate. My interests are broader than Steppenwolf activities, I'm not interested in spending time at my desk. Since 1980 we handled everything ourselves, our own tours, built up a cottage industry, it's demanded a lot of time, and we've survived and thrived in an industry that eats its young. I'm thankful for the wolfpack support.

As a teenager, when you moved from Germany to Toronto, was that a chance to fulfil a dream?

Yes absolutely, that's an apt description. I grew up as an air guitarist, listening to the music on the radio. I had a fantasy... well, in my case it was more extreme, not speaking English at the time. I wasn't infatuated by the spotlight, but the music itself. Listening to people like Elvis Presley and Little Richard, there wasn't a lot going on lyrically.

It became an obsession. When I was growing up in Germany, I'd take every opportunity to listen to the radio or hang out at carnivals. The carnival owners realised they

could attract youths by pumping out music so we'd hang around listening to it, with the older kids ogling girls. The music gave me goose bumps.

The Early Steppenwolf album shows both The Sparrow's blues edge and how much Steppenwolf material you'd written back then.

When I joined The Sparrows – later The Sparrow, singular – they were quite poppy, a “We can do this too” answer to the British Invasion led by The Beatles. I'd already been doing stuff by then and brought in a blues element. Drummer Gerry Edmonton got into it at it took off from there. We moved to San Francisco and we changed. We were influenced by the Bay Area bands of the time. We stretched stuff out, started jamming. We started writing more stuff, I wrote Ostrich around that time Steppenwolf was a major step, like a reaction to what we were doing: more intense, more aggressive. The Sparrow were polite by comparison.

Why did The Sparrow only last for two singles?

The producer was nudging the band towards a radio-friendly direction, and the singles were the antithesis of what Steppenwolf became. We (Steppenwolf) did a demo for ABC Dunhill, recorded in a studio set up in a garage, and the label didn't understand or get what we were about. But they had a thin rule book – not like a big corporate label with a huge roster – so they tore up the rule book and took a chance.

Didn't some of The Sparrow material appear a couple of years later?

Yes, Columbia put out an LP by John Kay & The Sparrow, in an attempt to capitalise on the Steppenwolf success.

Wasn't the first album recorded in four days?

Our producer back then, Gabriel Mekler, a great guy, had worked with The Mamas And The Papas; we set up in the United/Western Studios in LA. It was a big studio, company-run place, competent, and we spent 10 days in there. Then, almost by accident, we discovered The American Recording Studio through a friend; much smaller. We set up and played, and the demos sounded better than the finished product at the first studio. We thought, “That's how we sound live!” And we recorded the album with a great degree of enthusiasm. We knew the material from playing it live and managed to get it all done in four days.

You covered The Pusher. Did you have an anti-drugs stance as a band?

Yeah, I'm very strongly anti any addictive drug and those who push it. I saw Hoyt Axton perform it several times and it always got a strong response from the audience, and I shared the viewpoint. Soft drugs like marijuana I have no problem with, I was a consumer in those days. But injecting anything I also find offensive, unless it's something like medicine. Back then it was heroin, but it's worse now with stuff like crack (cocaine), so the song's still relevant.

Didn't your contract with ABC Dunhill require two albums per year?

That was... Well, now I don't say what should have and could have, but it was an unfortunate reality. Our management wasn't sufficiently progressive. The label wanted two LPs per year but we said you'll get it when it's ready. There were label concerns because our concern was to do better product and

“Steppenwolf was a reaction... more intense, more aggressive”



then promote it, go on tour, do the TV stuff. It burnt us out, but I have no complaints about it now.

You wrote many political songs. Did you find the Nixon government a natural lyrical inspiration?

Oh yes! My interest in politics isn't always about the workings, just a good system and the human rights that goes with it. I'm still interested to this day. My roots are – after fleeing East Germany – growing up in West Germany. I remember watching the newsreel reports of the East German uprising as a nine-year-old. I was then moved by footage from the Hungarian movements too. When I was in Canada I saw footage of police attacking peaceful demonstrators, which enraged me.

I witnessed folk festivals, where you had Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie writing about this stuff – the draft, etc. Then hearing The Byrds playing Dylan songs made me realise that electric songs can have meaningful lyrics, not just be about love. And the Nixon government, when you think about what came out on the tapes, it represented that kind of oppression.

Was exhaustion behind your breaking up the band in 1972?

Absolutely. We'd had our ups and downs in terms of quality of output. *Monster* was a highpoint, a reinjection of energy, and we had a break when we put out *Steppenwolf Live* – though I wish we'd recorded more nights. On *Steppenwolf 7* we had a line-up change that was not for the best, and I did not want to be obligated to the producers.

How did the reformation come about?

In between I'd recorded an album, had a hit. I was recording a second when an agent called to discuss a farewell tour. There was a lot of interest in Germany and the others agreed to it. But I still had this album to finish.



The band had had a break and gained fresh energy, so we had both bands on the same bill: The John Kay Band, and Steppenwolf headlining. The solo album was put on hold and got finished later. I didn't think Dunhill handled it well, so we parted company. When we got back together we signed to the MUMS label, who were distributed by CBS. We did three albums, *Slow Flux*, *Hour Of The Wolf* and *Skullduggery*. Things started well but didn't end up that way. We ended up on Epic, who felt like they inherited us and had no interest.

Were you always popular in Germany?

Our popularity there has deepened over the years. We first toured there in 1969 because of the success of *Easy Rider* – the film kind of paved the way. By 1973, when we did the farewell tour, we were really welcomed there.

In 1980 you went out as John Kay And Steppenwolf. Wasn't that a reaction to former members using the name?

Yes, I was taking a break. Various Steppenwolf members who had been fired

over the years knew the name wasn't being used, and they needed the money. It was not met with enthusiasm, there was no quality. There were two separate bands at one point, and I think an album planned. I became frustrated because Gerry and I tried to sue but the judicial system was so slow – paperwork passed from one state to another. So, in 1980, I went out as John Kay And Steppenwolf to drive them out. We had to rebuild our credibility from scratch. We went out on the road for four years solid, six nights a week, a different city every night, we played Europe too, rebuilding the name.

I remember playing one club, to about 300 people, and one guy came up to me and said, "You're not John Kay, because John Kay would never play a shithole like this," but that 300 would become 400, and so on. It would build slowly like that. And playing those smoky bars when I'd quit smoking was tough! So by 1986/87 we had everything in-house, our own cottage industry. In 1989 I moved to Tennessee, with a studio. We're in a better financial situation now.

Of the more recent albums I think *Rise And Shine* stands out.

I appreciate that, thank you. The previous album, *Rock'n'Roll Rebels*, came out when we were slogging it out six nights a week, making ego adjustments. It was tough. People still came to see us and we sent them home happy. With *Rise And Shine*, we'd been there, done all the hard work. It was all we could offer and not feel nostalgic. It wasn't 1968 anymore. The rebuilding worked for us.

How do you feel about the way your catalogue has been handled?

On the whole, quite pleased. There's a guy at UMC who's a real music guy, so when compilations have been done they've been done pretty well. Post-1980 it's a bit more hit-and-miss, the catalogue was spread, so we recently raised the assets to get the tapes and they're with my manager.

My interest now is in the Maue-Kay Foundation, where we provide financial assistance to projects and people involved in protecting wildlife, the environment and human rights. I like to enjoy time with my daughter, family and friends. We're spread around so we convene wherever we play. We have a great time, and I put the proceeds into the Foundation.

My manager takes care of the music side of things, frees me up to manage the foundation assets. I still write, but it's not so relevant to me when we'll record or release the songs. I've said goodbye to the music business, and hardly ever do interviews now.

Do you have any plans to play the UK?

I'm interested in hearing any offers. I would love to play the UK, but it has to be what I want to do, and where I want to play. The right season. ►



THE SPARROW

UK single

66 CBS 202342

Tomorrow's Ship/Isn't It Strange.....£75

The Sparrow US singles

66 Columbia 43755

Tomorrow's Ship/Isn't It Strange (some with promo p/s)£75/£50

67 Columbia 43960

Green Bottle Lover/Down Goes Your Love Life£60

67 Columbia 44769

Twisted/Squarehead People (as John Kay and The Sparrow)£25

STEPPENWOLF UK RELEASES

4/68 RCA RCA1679

Sookie Sookie/Take What You Need£10

8/68 RCA RCA1735

Born To Be Wild/Everybody's Next One£10

10/68 Stateside-Dunhill SS 8003

Magic Carpet Ride/Sookie Sookie.....£10

3/69 Stateside-Dunhill SS 8013

Rock Me/Jupiter Child.....£7

5/69 Stateside-Dunhill SS 8017

Born To Be Wild/Everybody's Next One (reissue)£8

9/69 Stateside-Dunhill SS 8027

Magic Carpet Ride/Sookie Sookie (reissue)£6

1/70 Stateside-Dunhill SS 8035

Monster/Move Over£6

3/70 Stateside-Dunhill SS 8038

The Pusher/Your Wall's Too High.....£6

6/70 Stateside-Dunhill SS 8049

Hey Lawdy Mama/Spiritual Fantasy£6

9/70 Stateside-Dunhill SS 8056

Screaming Night Hog/Spiritual Fantasy.....£6

11/70 Probe PRO 510

Who Needs Ya/Earschplittenloudenboomer£6

3/71 Probe PRO 525

Snowblind Friend/Hippo Stomp£6

7/71 Probe PRO 534

Ride With Me/For Madmen Only.....£6

10/71 Probe PRO 544

For Ladies Only/Sparkle Eyes£6

10/74 CBS MUM2679

Straight Shootin' Woman/Justice Don't Be Slow£6

4/75 CBS MUM3147

Smoky Factory Blues/A Fool's Fantasy.....£6

8/75 CBS MUM3470

Caroline (Are You Ready)/Angel Drawers.....£6

6/80 MCA MCA614

Born To Be Wild/The Pusher (reissue)£4

4/83 Old Gold OG9323

Born To Be Wild/The Pusher (reissue)£3

2/99 MCA MCS TD48104

Born To Be Wild/Magic Carpet Ride/Rock Me (CD single) £6

5/68 RCA RD/SF 7974

STEPPENWOLF (LP, initially white, later silver sleeve, mono/stereo)£50/£30

1/69 Stateside (S)SL 5003

STEPPENWOLF THE SECOND (LP, mono/stereo) £30/£25

6/69 Stateside (S)SL 5011

AT YOUR BIRTHDAY PARTY (LP, mono/stereo).....£25/20

7/69 Stateside (S)SL 5015

EARLY STEPPENWOLF (LP, actually The Sparrow live)....£15

1/70 Stateside-Dunhill SSL 5021

MONSTER (LP, gatefold sleeve)£18

6/70 Stateside-Dunhill SSL 5029

STEPPENWOLF 'LIVE' (2LP, gatefold sleeve)£20

11/70 Probe SPBA 6254

STEPPENWOLF 7 (LP)£15

10/71 Probe SPBA 6260

FOR LADIES ONLY (LP)£15

10/74 CBS 80358

SLOW FLUX (LP)£10

9/75 CBS 69151

HOUR OF THE WOLF (LP)£10

5/77 Epic 81328

SKULLDUGGERY (LP)£7.50

4/72 Probe 1054

7/73 Probe 6274

6/78 Mercury 9110 054

1/02 Crosscut CCD 12204

HERETICS & PRIVATEERS (CD)£10

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HERETICS & PRIVATEERS (CD)£10

STEPPENWOLF US RELEASES

11/67 Dunhill 4109

A Girl I Know/The Ostrich£12

1/68 Dunhill 4123

Sookie Sookie/Take What You Need£12

6/68 Dunhill 4138

Born To Be Wild/Everybody's Next One£15

9/68 Dunhill 4160

Magic Carpet Ride/Sookie Sookie.....£10

2/69 Dunhill 4182

Rock Me/Jupiter Child£10

5/69 Dunhill 4192

It's Never Too Late/Happy Birthday£10

8/69 Dunhill 4205

Move Over/Power Play£10

12/69 Dunhill 4221

Monster/Berry Rides Again£10

4/70 Dunhill 4234

Hey Lawdy Mama/Spiritual Fantasy£10

8/70 Dunhill 4248

Screaming Night Hog/Spiritual Fantasy.....£10

8/70 Dunhill 4261

Who Needs Ya/Earschplittenloudenboomer£10

2/71 Dunhill 4269

Snowblind Friend/Hippo Stomp£10

7/71 Dunhill 4283

Ride With Me/For Madmen Only.....£10

10/71 Dunhill 4292

For Ladies Only/Sparkle Eyes£10

9/74 MUMS 6031

1/75 MUMS 6034

4/75 MUMS 6036

8/75 MUMS 6040

1/68 Dunhill 50029

11/68 Dunhill 50053

3/69 Dunhill 50060

7/69 Dunhill 50060

11/69 Dunhill 50066

4/70 Dunhill 50075

11/70 Dunhill 50090

10/71 Dunhill 50110

9/74 MUMS 33093

9/75 MUMS 33583

5/77 Epic 34120

12/77 Epic 34382

Straight Shootin' Woman/Justice Don't Be Slow£5

Get Into The Wind/Morning Blue£5

Smoky Factory Blues/A Fool's Fantasy.....£5

Caroline (Are You Ready)/Angel Drawers.....£5

STEPPENWOLF (LP, mono/stereo)£45/£35

STEPPENWOLF THE SECOND (LP, mono/stereo) £30/£25

AT YOUR BIRTHDAY PARTY (LP, mono/stereo, gatefold die-cut sleeve)£30/£25

EARLY STEPPENWOLF (LP, live recording of The Sparrow).....£20

MONSTER (LP, gatefold sleeve)£20

STEPPENWOLF 'LIVE' (2LP, gatefold sleeve)£25

STEPPENWOLF 7 (LP, gatefold sleeve)£18

FOR LADIES ONLY (LP, gatefold sleeve).....£15

SLOW FLUX (LP)£12

HOUR OF THE WOLF (LP)£12

SKULLDUGGERY (LP)£8

REBORN TO BE WILD (LP, remixes).....£8

SELECTED COMPILATIONS

67 Columbia CS-9758 JOHN KAY AND THE SPARROW (USA only)£25

3/71 Probe SPB 1033 GOLD£12

7/72 Probe SPB 1059 REST IN PEACE (LP)£12

3/73 Probe SPB1071 16 GREATEST HITS (LP)£10

7/85 MCA MCM5002 GOLDEN GREATS (LP)£6

1988 MCA MCA-25167 LONE STEPPENWOLF (CD, John Kay solo)£6

91 MCA MCA10389 BORN TO BE WILD: A RETROSPECTIVE (CD).....£6

5/93 Legacy 53044 TIGHTEN UP YOUR WIG - THE BEST OF JOHN KAY & SPARROW (CD of above Sparrow LP)£10

2/99 MCA MCLD19386 THE BEST OF STEPPENWOLF (CD)£5

SELECTED JOHN KAY & STEPPENWOLF ALBUMS

These are largely USA releases, as only Rock And Roll Rebels, Rise & Shine and Paradox were issued in the UK.

12/81 Mercury/Polygram LIVE IN LONDON (LP, as John Kay & Steppenwolf)£10

Australia 6437147

82 Nautilus/Wolf NR-53 WOLFTRACKS (LP, as John Kay & Steppenwolf, reissued on CD 1997 as Five Finger Discount).....£10

84 Attic/Wolf LAT-1191 PARADOX (CD, originally Canada/Australia only)£10

7/87 Quill 1560 ROCK AND ROLL REBELS (LP, as John Kay & Steppenwolf, also CD)£7.50

8/90 IRS 241066-1 RISE & SHINE (LP as John Kay & Steppenwolf, also CD) £7.50

95 ERA Records 5030 LIVE AT 25 (2CD, as John Kay & Steppenwolf)£10

96 Winter Harvest FEED THE FIRE (CD, as John Kay & Steppenwolf remixes, re-recordings and new material)£7.50

WH 3310-2 LIVE IN LOUISVILLE (CD, also DVD, as John Kay & Steppenwolf).....£10

04 Rainman ROCK'N'ROLL ODYSSEY (DVD, as John Kay & Steppenwolf).....£10

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