

From the typical bullshit

Steppenwolf grooves in a jetstream of sound

Steppenwolf played Edmonton August 29. Later, at the International Airport enroute to Wnnipeg, John Kay talked to **Holger Peterson**, a NAIT student in radio and television arts, a part-time employee of CKUA. This interview is the result.

There's one thing I would like to talk to you about and that's the Canadian aspect of your group, four members of your group being Canadian . . .

Well, let me put it this way. The chemistry of the group is this: we have Nick St. Nicholas who was actually born in Germany but immigrated in the early 50's; he is now a naturalized Canadian and I'm sure he thinks of himself as a Canadian citizen. I came to Canada in '58 and I lived in Toronto until '63. I consider myself a citizen of the world because I've lived in three or four different countries and I've seen all their good and bad points. I just don't believe in boundaries and nationalism and all those things. I think that it's just a way of hyping your own inadequacies and fostering jealousies for other countries, so I don't really go into that. Jerry Edmonton and Goldie McJohn are both Canadian born; we have actually three Canadian citizens, two that are Canadian born. I'm still a German citizen although I've been on this continent 10 or 11 years so I don't really know what citizen I am, and Larry of course is American. As for Nick, Goldie and Jerry, as far as they're concerned I'm sure they . . . Toronto in particular was something we wanted to do because it was something like a spawning ground for the Sparrow and the circumstances of the Pop Festival when we were around, with the rain and bad equipment, but the audience was groovy.

"Its body music, you know, it just makes you move."

When you were in Toronto as the Sparrow, there were four of the members that are now in Steppenwolf, is that right?

That's right, everybody except Larry was in the Sparrow at one time or another.

Toronto seems to be the spawning ground for different Canadian musicians and I'm wondering, back in '65, was there like you mentioned the San Francisco rock culture. Was there anything like that happening with you and the Hawks?

I can't speak about Toronto's musical trip prior to '58, but the Hawks were like "musician's musicians". The Hawks were in the slick bar band thing but they played fantastic music so everybody was there at the Concord Tavern on Saturday afternoon, trying to emulate Robbie Robertson's guitar and that led to things like Jay Smith and the Majestics, John Lee and the Checkmates and the Rogues, and Freddie Keeler, Jay King and all those guys. That was the one thing which was triggered off by the Hawks, whether one could call it the Toronto sound or the Canadian thing, well that's hard to debate, because some of the Hawks were originally from Arkansas, and Hawkins in the initial stage had a big role in shaping the direction they were going in. At that time the Yorkville Village thing was getting together so that was the only geographic district within the city which permitted its inhabitants to go into the "long-haired" thing. Things like the Paupers, who were good friends of ours, and the Myna Birds, who were good friends, and a cast of thousands later on. From there on in, there was just a typical musical development, those that got from copying into something of their own. Unless because of bad management or the border hang-up, they eventually split up because it wasn't profitable anymore. If they managed to survive they made it. David Clayton Thomas eventually got into it, and John Finley, and Rabbit from the Checkmates, and Joni Mitchell and Elise Winberg, and all those people who are out on the coast now.

Was this a big step for you, going down there?

Not really, I lived in Canada until '63, but I lived in the States, in California,



JOHN KAY OF STEPPENWOLF
... a fusing of musical traditions

—Doug Cole photo

kind of bumming around, playing as a single act and later, on one of my return visits to New York, playing in Yorkville Village as a single act. I met the Sparrow and that's how it came about.

The Sparrow initially moved to San Francisco, is that right?

Well, not really. We wound up there. We took off from Toronto to New York City and we played Arthur's and all the typical bullshit that you do. While I was in California the Byrds took off there, and I witnessed that whole interaction between radio stations and hype and record companies. I figured that we would get a lot higher, a lot faster if we were out on the coast because I knew that scene and in New York you can beat your brains out in discotheques doing five sets a night forever and nobody will take any notice of you. So we went out to L.A. and did

"Our new album has a funky groove to it, but it's a concept album."

really well at the Whiskey, but it just so happened that concurring with our appearance there, there were these Sunset Strip riots, so that made the Municipal government take away all the dancing licences from the clubs and that killed the scene just like that. We wound up in San Francisco at the right time, about the end of October or November. In January of the following year, they had the first human be-in, about 40,000 people and got into that big Haight-Ashbury thing. And again, we pulled out of Frisco and went down to L.A. because we felt that we were removing ourselves too far away from the industry and we were just digging our own trip without paying attention to what was really going on around us. And in L.A., we split up because of Columbia's

attitude towards us. As it turned out we pulled out before that whole Haight-Ashbury thing fell apart.

Since your first LP, you've diversified from your original rock sound. You've diversified on your third even more than on your second. Is this the direction you're going in, expanding in all areas?

Collectively, all of us know certain musical idioms that we're familiar with, and we work within the framework of these. Influences of what we get exposed to come in and they're fused into that. But basically, our musical advances are of a slow, natural evolution. Our new album will have the same kind of funky, familiar groove to it, but it's a concept album. It's a political-social concept album, where everything revolves around one central theme and it's like one piece of music. There's ten different songs, but they kind of flow into one another or are connected with musical bridges. It's called "Monster" and it deals with the American monster.

I guess you've written most of it, because well, that seems to be your bag, writing that type of song.

I've written all the lyrics and melodies, but the guys get together on the musical part.

From what I've heard of your LP's the whole group seems to have a very serious approach to music.

Everybody has certain taste in all things, we have ours in music and we try to keep the music of the best quality and highest standards relating to what we feel is good. It may not be good in somebody else's eyes.

What I was trying to get at is, since you've been right up at the top of the music industry for about a year, do you find this attitude is prevailing throughout the industry?

Most definitely. If it's going in any direction, I think it's going to a certain degree in duplicating the jazz era of very

to an interaction of styles

talented soloists and musicians pursuing their own musical trip until they reach something that makes them unique, and then looking for the perfect combinations of other musicians with whom to play. That whole thing of the breaking up of different groups and forming different combinations of other musicians or going as singles, duos, trios or whatever. I think it's all a healthy sign, one of breaking away from the fear of blowing an image to the teenage public like the kind of thing that we had in the 50's and early 60's. Pursuing that goal of true self-satisfaction, musically through getting the right combination together. Blind Faith seems to be very happy about their make-up of members, and Bloomfield and Miles and various people have left certain groups because they felt that either the musical ideas had been drained and they were no longer giving off things with that same combination of people in that group. They went to other people to start a new thing, or they just felt that the remaining people were just going in a completely different direction from them. It's bringing about a greater range of musical knowledge among those musicians, and it contributes to the fusing of various musical backgrounds. We still have R & R and country and western and hard rock and all this sort of thing, but when one is really looking at it closely, folk-rock with the Byrds and country rock with the Burrito Brothers and all these people, they're all like new things that come in and they don't completely disappear. There's always a remnant of that influence which remains

"We're breaking away from the fear of blowing our public image."

within the big melting-pot of popular music and that's what I'm really happy about, to see people like the Beatles blend electronic and eastern classical and all these various things and do something cohesive which really communicates and has a lot of impact. It's body music, you know, it just makes you move. So I think this constant splitting of groups and reforming is just another symptom of this fusion. It's very reminiscent of the jazz days, like where the band leader would go out and he would have a ski lodge gig for the weekend and he'd pick up a piano and bass at the union hall, he'd pick up two guys, and he'd play as a trio for the weekend and then the next week he'd have a debutante ball and he'd hire 20 pieces. It's not quite like that now but it's getting closer to that sort of concept. Like Miles will sit in with Hendrix on an album and everybody's kind of intermingling, like they're jamming together and bringing different ideas together.

With all the gigantic Pop festivals we're having, especially this summer, it seems that all the groups are getting on stage together and just jamming. It's quite an experience for the groups, I guess.

Of course you have differences between certain musicians as well. For instance, you have people like Hendrix and Capton and various people are musicians foremost, and very able writers, but I don't think they're dealing very much with lyrical content. In our group it's a slight reverse of that. We have very talented and capable musicians in the group but we don't really push the soloist idea or the outstanding one guy type of thing. In other words, our appeal is the collective thing of physical image and the material, lyrically and the rhythmic impact just on the musical thing. We are playing more to the audience as a kind of group where we can reflect back some thoughts, ideas and opinions which are common among our audience anyway. In other words we appeal to a combination of both mind and body rather than just the mind. Like I could go and see somebody like Buffy St. Marie, with a lot of heavy topical songs, and I could be moved by that, but by the same token if I would see Hendrix jam or like I've witnessed the Cream concerts or various people that I admire, I could be equally moved, but in a different way. And that's exactly where it is with us.