

Hail! Hail! Rock and Roll

By Andrew Chatwood

When we were young and foolish, back in the 1970s and 1980s, we worshipped at the altar of rock and roll. Bands received cult-like devotion. There was a hierarchy of guitar gods: Beck, Clapton, Page, Zappa and many others. They mastered the fret-board and the esoterica of pickups, feedback and assorted techniques of distortion. They commanded our affection and respect.

After paying the princely sum of \$15 or \$20, sometimes as much as \$35, we would rush onto the arena floor and sprint to the stage. Hours of bliss and oblivion were ours; gently massaged by the sound waves of epic rock and roll. Later, half-deaf and giddy from the nearness of our idols, we recommitted to the ascendancy and power of the six-string electric guitar and rock & roll.

Mike Woods did all of that, and then took the next step. His commitment to rock and roll led to the creation of the Northumberland Rock and Roll Museum, located on the 3rd and 4th floors of 27 Walton Street, Port Hope, Ontario. Over the past 12 years, a large and comprehensive collection of artifacts from the golden age of rock and roll grew under his guidance. An



archaeologist from the future, stumbling into the museum, would feel like Howard Carter in Tutankhamun's tomb. "Do you see anything?" "Yes, wonderful things!"

The raison d'être for this rock and roll museum is to preserve the memories and passion of rock and roll. Mike acknowledges his desire to preserve the past, while creating a level of understanding for the current generation of music lovers. Right now, he says, there is a generation in place

with active memories of the music, and the lifestyle that it represented to the world. In another generation, that link will be broken.

There's a story told that Mick Jagger and Keith Richards met on a train heading into London. Keith went over and spoke to Mick, because he recognized the blues album covers under Mick's arm. If they were on the train today, they'd have iPods and be staring out the windows, listening over earbuds. The display of your musical interests is not available to those around you.

And the format of popular music has changed. The Northumberland Rock and Roll Museum chronicles the change from 45's to albums, what Mike calls the "golden age". Back in the day, an album was a piece of conceptual art, which represented the artist. The music was certainly the major piece, but album art was an involved and integral piece of the puzzle. When you think of Yes, the visual is usually a piece of Roger Dean's graphic art. Most people have a mental image of Sgt. Pepper's cluster of celebrities, and Paul's OPP patch on his shoulder. Chicago's eponymous logo identified the band from across a room. As you move through the museum, these cues trigger memories from every angle. Forgotten



episodes and feelings are resurrected by these reminders. By way of contrast, in today's musical environment, songs are downloaded onto a computer in your room, not acquired in a record store. The visual images associated with a song now come from a music video, not an album cover.

The rock and roll museum has six main sections. And like any well-curated display or exhibition, it's not just the objects that are important. It's the context and feeling that they evoke. After entering the American Rock and Roll 1955-1965 section, you see a life-sized plaster Elvis, sitting across from a diner counter with spinning stool seats. Where do you find a life-sized Elvis? "Clay Benson," acknowledges Mike. "He's a good man to know when you have a rock and roll museum." Entering the British Rock 1963-1969 section evokes the basement rec-room, where many people escaped to find the turntable. What is the most significant piece in the museum? Mike points to a framed set of photos with signatures. When the Beatles were in Toronto, in 1964, Creighton Orr (a local celebrity) was a fireman in Toronto. He caught up with the boys at the King Edward Hotel, and got their signatures on a card. When you enter the Psychedelic Era, you pass through a bead curtain and the first thing you see is an original Woodstock poster.

The 1970s and 1980s are represented by a wall of albums, t-shirts and memorabilia from the era of metal and power rock. Pride of place goes to an equipment case from Deep Purple, which contained some of Ian Paice's drum kit. In Mike's opinion, Deep Purple was an under-rated band. He mentions that, in terms of sheer metal power, they are said to have cracked the foundation of Massey Hall.

Canadian Rock has its own section, and many interesting stories to tell. Canadian musicians have been very supportive of this enterprise. Gordon Lightfoot has signed material for him. The Tragically Hip donated the cover art from *In Violet Light*. For the most part, popular culture treats Canada as a version of the United States. In the rock universe, Canada exists as a very separate entity. Some bands made it big in Canada, while not so much elsewhere: Supertramp, and The Cult to name

two. Some notable events in rock history are commemorated here, like the Stones' famous gig at the El Mocambo, where Margaret Trudeau danced with the band, and Keith Richards was arrested with heroin in his hotel room. Rather than throw him in jail for years, the judge ordered the band to perform a benefit concert in Oshawa. Mike has the MacLean's magazine with Margaret Trudeau on the cover, and the very rare bootleg of the Oshawa concert.

Each section has the ubiquitous shelves of albums, familiar to anyone who wasted their time in record stores. Where did you keep all this material? "Well," Mike laughs, "it's actually grown a lot since I came here. At first, it was just the one floor: now it's almost doubled in size." Mike is constantly on the hunt for new additions to the museum's collection. Over the years, he has found that a low-key, positive approach works best. Some performers are more than willing to sign material and listen to him. Others figure that this is just going to be another item that finds its way to eBay, and don't want anything to do with it. And in order to keep the budget in line, he frequently travels on his own to shows. Waiting until the last minute, when the scalpers are getting desperate usually pays off. "When Aerosmith was in town," he remembers, "I got in for \$40."

He waited patiently another night, and got to see Stephen Stills after a CS&N concert. He asked Stephen to sign an album, and Stephen said yes, but to send it onto the bus; he couldn't do it right there on the spot. Mike tucked a brochure for the museum into the album, as a way of making sure he got everything back. Stephen signed the album, and also signed the museum brochure, adding the inscription "What a great idea!"

The last major section of the museum is the Performance Venue. Mike gives guitar lessons in what must be the most inspirational setting this side of Electric Lady Land. The stage and decorations are exhibits in and of themselves: taken from the 2009 Junos and transported carefully to Port Hope. It was suggested that his students must be older men on a nostalgia trip, wandering around after their lesson, soaking up the ambience. "No," he said

wryly, "usually I'm teaching their sons while they wander around."

With his wife, Christine Benson, Mike runs an arts education camp called Journey Through the Arts. "We have a music series," he recalls, "and at one point, we (the kids and I) write a song together." He asks them what kind of song they want to write: happy or sad, slow or fast. "Most of them have no idea what they want; they just shrug their shoulders." Is there a lack of identification with music, which was there in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s? Hopefully, by bringing music back into their lives, one special person will receive a lasting spark.

The rock and roll museum is an acknowledged local resource. The music class from Port Hope High School makes annual field trips to listen and learn. The performance space, in the middle of the main hall, hosts regular performance by local artists. One of Mike's dreams is to make the museum a dynamic entity, not just a static display. As might be expected, his musical interests aren't limited to just teaching and running a museum. He has a couple of musical outlets: a band known as Barefoot Soul, which does covers, and solo music under his own name. Right now, there's a CD in the works under the Mike Woods brand.

Any museum, large or small, is judged by strict standards. What is the quality of its artifacts? Is the scope comprehensive? Do they represent and reflect the overall theme? Mike Woods has a low-key, laid-back demeanour. It's hard to get him to talk about himself, believe me. But his tenacity and scholarly thoroughness has created a gem which brings back the hours spent flipping vinyl on the turntable, and the first concert you ever went to.

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