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## Weekend

Why the roots of rock are found in Chester



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# Rock's roots

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*Johnny Kay makes the case for Chester's role in rock 'n roll's rise*

Johnny Kay, who was with Bill Haley and the Comets, is still rockin' and is a strong backer of Chester's role in the birth and progression of rock 'n roll.



[www.jkrockets.com](http://www.jkrockets.com)

# Rock's roots? Begin with Chester

■ Bill Haley and the Comets guitar player Johnny Kay beats the drum for Chester. He and former band members have a new CD out to honor city.

By LAURA WISELEY  
Times Correspondent

There's no question in Johnny Kay's mind where rock 'n' roll really began. "I've heard people saying Elvis Presley started rock 'n' roll, that the Beatles started rock 'n' roll," he said.

"Chuck Berry and Little Richard said for years that they started it. But I'm tired of everyone rewriting history."

Where it began, Kay said, was right here in Delaware County, in a little city called Chester.

"This is the place rock 'n' roll started," he said. "This is where rock 'n' roll went worldwide. And this is the area that's being overlooked."

And that's why Kay titled his latest album "Songs from the Cradle of Rock 'N' Roll: Chester, PA." The album, on which Kay sings and plays lead guitar for his band JK Rockets, was released this month.

Kay, the former lead guitarist for the Chester-based band Bill Haley and the Comets, said that it was one of Haley's signature songs, "Rock-A-Beatin' Boogie," that first used the term "rock 'n' roll," making the city the birthplace of the term. "Bill Haley and the Comets — we were all local Chester guys," he said. "That's why Chester is the cradle of rock 'n' roll."

As a tribute to the city's signature sound, Kay and the JK Rockets — which includes fellow Chester natives Bill Rapp on rhythm guitar and Stan Kay on drums — have recorded 12 songs in styles ranging from rockabilly to Chicago-style blues to what Kay calls "folksy country."

"For each song, what we did was try to take elements from the kind of music we liked in the '50s and '60s and give it a modern flair," Kay said.

The title song, Kay said, is inevitably the favorite of everyone who listens to the



The album jacket for Bill Haley and the Comets features Johnny Kay on right playing guitar.

album. Other fan favorites include the ballad "Brand New Me" and the Johnny Cash-esque "Good Good Thing."

Kay's personal favorites are the songs that closely mirror his own experiences as a longtime musician.

"My favorite, 'Too Much Rock 'N' Roll in 'Em Bones,' is about a guy who just feels too good because he's full of rock 'n' roll," Kay said. "And 'Never 2 Late 2 Rock,' which was going to be the title of the album until we recorded 'Cradle,' is about coming full circle, the way I went from being a rock 'n' roller to a businessman and back to a rock 'n' roller. When I was younger, I thought I'd be done with rock 'n' roll by the time I was 40, but look at all the older guys that are still playing — the Eagles, Aerosmith. They're still drawing great clouds, so maybe you are never too old to rock."

Kay's own career started in his teens, when he formed a band that eventually became known as Johnny Kay and the Rockets.

"One night, we were playing at the VFW post in West Chester, and Bill Haley's manager came in to listen to us,"

to Kay.

"Bill had always been a very talented songwriter, and I said to him, 'Why don't you write a few songs, and we'll have fun singing them?'" Kay said. "Then, my brother (Stan) got involved and said, 'Why don't we record them?' He set us up in his studio in Glen Mills, and for two years, we worked on putting together an album, with Bill recording in Montana and digitally sending us his recordings, and Stan and me working in his studio."

The album was released last month, and is available through the JK Rockets Web site, [www.jkrockets.com](http://www.jkrockets.com). It will also be available on iTunes later this month.

"We've been getting great reactions from all over the country, and it's even getting some interest in Europe," Kay said.

And, though he was hesitant to talk about his time with the Comets for many years, Kay said the album's had the added benefit of helping him re-live the good times.

"For a long time, I thought that part of my life was over, but then one day you realize that music is in your soul, and you can never shake it. You've got to have that music fix all the time. You've got to play."

For Kay, that also means playing where it all began.

"I'm lucky," he said. "I was in the right place at the right time in the right city. I think that's why this album is happening now — so that we could come full circle."

For more information on JK Rockets, or to hear a preview of "Songs from the Cradle of Rock 'N' Roll," visit [www.jkrockets.com](http://www.jkrockets.com).

#### Want to listen?

■ Look online to hear Johnny Kay's favorite song. Click on entertainment tab at [www.delcotimes.com](http://www.delcotimes.com)

he said. "The next Saturday, I got a phone call asking if I'd like to audition for the Comets. I thought it was a joke, and even when I went to Bill Haley's office in

Chester, I thought one of my friends was going to be there to say 'Gotcha!'"

The call was true, though, and after playing "Johnny B. Goode" and "Shake, Rattle and Roll" for Haley, he was asked to learn the guitar solo for "Rock Around the Clock" by the end of the next week.

Kay spent the next eight years playing lead guitar for Bill Haley and the Comets, traveling around the world as a member of the band.

After leaving the Comets, Kay opened a video production business, which he operated for 30 years before selling it last year.

Two years ago, Bill Rapp, who had moved to Montana, came back to the area for a visit — and made a fateful phone call



Johnny Kay plays his old Gibson guitar.



JK Rockets "Songs from the Cradle of Rock 'N' Roll" is a tribute to Chester and its role in the genre's development

[www.jkrockets.com](http://www.jkrockets.com)

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