

# The News Journal

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## Life

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"This area is the cradle of Rock 'N' Roll, said Kay. It was right there in Chester, PA. This is where it started, and it doesn't get enough credit.

WEB SITE:

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

# Present at the creation

Guitarist Johnny Kay was part of rock 'n' roll history as a member of Bill Haley and his Comets

By RYAN CORMIER  
The News Journal

**FOX POINT** - When it comes to the early days of rock 'n' roll, **Johnny Kay** had a birds-eye view as a member of Bill Haley's backing band, the Comets.

He was there in Hamburg, Germany, in 1962, meeting with The Beatles after their show in front of a crowd of screaming girls, even getting a preview of their unreleased single "Love Me Do."

He was there in England in 1966, when the elevator he was riding with Bill Haley and Little Richard got stuck between floors. He watched as Richard dropped to the floor crying, "Oh Lord, we're gonna die!" and laughed along with Haley at Richard's overreaction.

And he was there in 1972, backstage at Wembley Stadium, in London, talking to the Rolling Stones' Mick Jagger. After watching a show featuring aging early rock stars, Jagger told him, "I'll never tour when I'm 50." (At 65, Jagger still tours with The Rolling Stones and shows no sign of stopping.)

Being a member of one of the most important groups in rock history has its privileges.

For a dozen years, Kay, now 68, traveled the world with Haley, nicknamed the Godfather of Rock 'n' Roll for his role in kick-starting the rock era with "Rock Around the Clock" in 1955.

Nearly 50 years after joining the Comets, Kay has just released a new album as a member of JK Rockets, "Songs From the Cradle of Rock 'n' Roll," returning to his roots of early rock mixed with blues, country and swing.

The album, available on iTunes and Amazon, has led Kay to reflect on his younger days, starting at a time when rock music didn't even exist, to being side by side with one of its originators and performing on national television shows like "American Bandstand" and "The Mike Douglas Show."

## IF YOU GO

**Johnny Kay performing with Al Santoro & the Hi-liters**

**WHEN:** 8 p.m. Friday

**WHERE:** Hideaway Lounge, 2619 Ebright Road, Brandywine Hundred

**COST:** Free

**INFORMATION:** [www.hi-liters.com](http://www.hi-liters.com)

## A fateful performance

Kay decided to pick up a guitar for the first time at the age of 14, when, while laid up with bronchitis, he heard Haley singing "Rock the Joint" on a local radio station.

"I learned on my own, and two years later I had my own band and we were gigging in the area, playing six nights a week while still going to high school," he says. "At one of the jobs we played in Chester, Haley's manager came in and saw me play just when Haley's guitar player Franny Beecher was leaving."

After the show, the manager called Kay, and soon Kay was performing "Rock Around the Clock" in front of Haley, his rock idol, and got the job at the age of 19.

He immediately went on the road with the band in 1960, sticking with the band until 1968 and returning on and off through 1972.

Haley, who died in 1981 at 55, grew up in Booth's Corner, Pa., and began performing in the Brandywine Valley area with plenty of early rock shows held right here in Delaware.

"This area is where it started and that's kind of been forgotten," says Kay, who lives at the Paladin Club. "This area actually is the cradle of rock 'n' roll. It was right there in Chester, Pa. This is where it



## A NEW ALBUM

Johnny Kay's new album, "Songs From the Cradle of Rock 'n' Roll" by the JK Rockets, is available at iTunes, Amazon or [www.digstation.com](http://www.digstation.com).

Go to his Web site, [www.jkrockets.com](http://www.jkrockets.com), to view clips of him playing lead guitar with Bill Haley & the Comets at Wembley Stadium in 1972 from the concert film "London Rock and Roll Show."

started and it doesn't get enough credit. "The music was formed here. It was tested here. It was experimented with here. And it was perfected here."

In addition to the iconic "Rock Around the Clock," Haley and his Comets scored big hits with songs like "Shake, Rattle & Roll" and "See You Later, Alligator."

Over time, Haley - his song "Crazy Man, Crazy" was the first rock song on the Billboard charts in 1953 - has been somewhat forgotten,

overshadowed by splashier performers from the early rock era, like Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Bo Diddley and Little Richard.

"Bill was the guy who made rock 'n' roll famous with 'Rock Around the Clock.' He is acknowledged more in Europe than here as being the creator," Kay says. "I was watching a series on MTV about rock and they left Bill out. I got kind of p.o.d. They started with Elvis Presley. So Elvis created rock? Bill was playing rock three years before Elvis. Then I

See **JOHNNY**  
— 87



Johnny Kay (center) performing with the Comets. Bill Haley is at right.

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# Rock: A Comet looks back gratefully

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heard another person say The Beatles started rock 'n' roll. There is some revision of history going on."

Unlike The Beatles, Haley and the Comets didn't have girls throwing themselves at them.

"Bill didn't have the sex appeal. It was more the music. People came for the music. There were very little drugs in those days and no one in the band really drank. We were kind of the oddballs," says Kay, who, with Haley, toured overseas with acts like Manfred Mann and The Dave Clark Five and sat in with legends like Bo Diddley and Big Joe Turner.

"[The Beatles] had any woman they wanted. They brought them backstage. There were some nice women back there."

Speaking of The Beatles, Kay distinctly remembers hearing "Love Me Do" for the first time, with George Harrison playing it on a turntable backstage at the Star Club in Hamburg in 1962.

"He asked, 'What do you think,' and I said, 'That's good,'" says Kay, who still has a super-sized photo with the faded autographs of all four Beatles from a 1964 meeting. "He then gave [the single] to Bill and Bill liked it. So he brought it back to [the] Decca [music label] and played it for Bill's producer, Milt Gabler. I was there, and Gabler said, 'They sound like The Everly Brothers. They'll never make it.' Those were his exact words. Decca could have had The Beatles."

Like The Beatles, many of those break-out English rock bands would come to see Haley play, and their infatuation with early American rock was evident.

"They would ask all sorts of questions: 'What was it like before rock 'n' roll? What were your influences? Did you ever see Joe Turner play?'" Kay remembers.

There was more of that kind of talk with The Rolling Stones' Jagger in 1972 at the Wembley Stadium rock revival show called "London Rock and Roll Show" – a night of music with Haley, Berry,

Richard, Diddley and others, which was filmed and later released as a concert film. It was directed by Peter Clifton, who had previously directed the Led Zeppelin concert film, "The Song Remains the Same."

It was the first concert put on at the stadium. And from Kay's perspective in front of a towering stack of Marshall amplifiers, that wasn't a surprise to him.

"I played the fist note and I thought my teeth were going to blow out," he says, laughing. "It was so loud. I could only hear me. I watched the drummer's backbeat and Bill's lips to be in time."

## Back home

After ending his time with Haley in 1972, Kay returned home and continued to teach guitar and began performing with Wilmington saxophonist Al Santoro, who has been playing in the area for more than 50 years. (You can see Santoro and Kay perform at the Hideaway Lounge in Brandywine Hundred at 8 p.m. Friday.)

Santoro has performed with the understated Kay for 37 years and says he usually has to drag stories out of Kay about his days on tour with Haley.

"He's a very nonchalant guy," Santoro says. "He doesn't like to boast about anything."

On the new album, Kay is teamed up with

his drummer brother, Stan, and old friend and songwriter Bill Rapp. The album, with rollicking highlights like "Sudden Soul Full of Rock 'n' Roll" and "Cradle of Ol' Rock 'n' Roll," coincides with a Europe-only anthology of Kay's career, "A Tale of a Comet," due later this spring, covering his time the Comets, his previous band, Johnny Kay's Rockets, and his latest songs. The album will include album cuts, demos and live recordings.

Looking back, Kay is in awe of the position he was in at such a young age, watching the emergence and evolution of rock 'n' roll. "Not many people got a chance to be part of that experience," he says. "I'm grateful for it. I was in the right place at the right time. And I got to see the birth of something and not many people can say that."

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Johnny Kay (top right) in 1959 with Johnny Kay's Rockets.

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Above: Johnny Kay's autographed poster of The Beatles given to him by the group in 1964 in Manchester, England. The signatures have faded, but if you click on the photo, you can see them better.

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LINK TO ONLINE ARTICLE:

<http://www.delawareonline.com/blogs/2009/05/wilmingtons-johnny-kay-on-his-days-with.html>