

rock's backpages

Live Review: John Kay & Steppenwolf, Theatre at Westbury (NY), Sept. 1, 2012

<http://tinyurl.com/hv6s7ty>

Author: [larryjaffee](#) 02 Sep 2012

By Larry Jaffee

It's nearly a certainty that globally two Steppenwolf songs will be played every day on terrestrial radio or Internet-based stations or music sharing services. Yes, "Born to Be Wild" and "Magic Carpet Ride" are late 1960s classics that captured the zeitgeist of society's seeds of change.

Yet more than four decades later, one never tires of either song. Their undeniable catchy three minutes somehow does not sound dated and will remain permanently in the annals of rock 'n' roll. Like most semi-successful bands of that era, Steppenwolf appeals to a fan base of baby boomers always looking for excuses to recapture their youth. That explains why band lead singer John Kay periodically hits the road with a band to whet the appetites to its fan base.

Kay was the only original member among the five-piece group that played September 2 at the [Theatre at Westbury](#), and since 1980 he's had had to occasionally compete with another touring entity claiming to be Steppenwolf that included former erstwhile bandmates. Perhaps not on the commercial scale of the Roger Waters vs. Pink Floyd litigation over the brand, Kay as frontman has made the claim in court and on stage, as he aptly demonstrated at last night's gig that he's the rightful owner to the mantle.

Speaking of capturing one's youth, Kay is an ageless wonder, looking much younger than 68 (born in April 1944 in eastern Germany), thin as a rail and sporting a full head of hair. But most importantly, his voice hasn't diminished at all, and in fact is arguably stronger now than when he was a "rock star." Clearly, here's a man who's lived his life cleanly – married to the same woman since his first success – and eschewing the dark-side trappings

that have claimed so many of his peers.

The nearly two-hour show opened with Steppenwolf debut single "Sookie, Sookie," and the set delved into other non-hit album tracks, such as Muddy Waters's "Hootchie Coochie Man," which was on the band's first album, and helped along by long-time keyboardist Michael Wilk's swampy organ fills. The band was fairly prolific during its recording heyday, cranking out two albums a year from 1968-1972, and Kay also continued in the studio with various solo projects that didn't yield a blockbuster. That substantial back catalogue of solo material and Steppenwolf is available for purchase on the robust, media-rich [Steppenwolf website](#). At the gig, there was also a merchandise table full of CDs, DVDs and t-shirts for concert-goers to take home souvenirs.

The focus was on the music, but the audience also received a lesson in civics, as Kay, sporting a t-shirt with the silhouette of Africa, peppered song introductions with various observations about how the socio-economic overtones of songs like "Monster" remain relevant. Its chorus goes: "America where are you now?" Kay pointed out that many Americans are currently concerned about losing their jobs and homes. He talked about how he felt in the mid-1960s Newport Folk Festival where he encountered other singer-songwriters like Tom Paxton, Phil Ochs and Bob Dylan who used their songs for social change. The set included "Do or Die," a fairly new song he wrote about the plight of Native Americans.

Not merely paying lip service, Kay and his wife's [Maue-Kay Foundation](#) provides financial assistance to projects and people involved in protecting wildlife, the environment and human rights.

Kay reminisced about how grateful he was as a kid (born during World War II in which the father he never knew was killed) to receive care packages that Germans like him received in 1946 from the U.S. even though "we were the enemy," and he questioned whether that level of humanitarian concern exists in 2012. Even though America is in the middle of a presidential election year, Kay's stage banter stayed cleared of partisan politics. Making sure it didn't turn into a sermon, Kay, of course, realized why he was there, and delivered the aforementioned greatest hits.

Of "Born to Be Wild," he thanked the continuing support of bikers, and how the song catapulted Steppenwolf to stardom, thanks to its inclusion on the *Easy Rider* soundtrack, but filmmakers Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda

didn't have any budget left to pay for the song. Kay also mentioned that he never worried about Hell's Angels getting too rowdy at their shows; it was always the drunk college kids who caused a ruckus. The encore, Hoyt Axton's anti-drug "The Pusher," capped a totally satisfying night down memory lane.

Thank you to tour manager Charlie Wolf to get Kay to autograph my Mexican EP pressing (see picture sleeve), a prized possession purchased in Mexico in the early 1970s when I was a teenager visiting the country with my high school Spanish class.