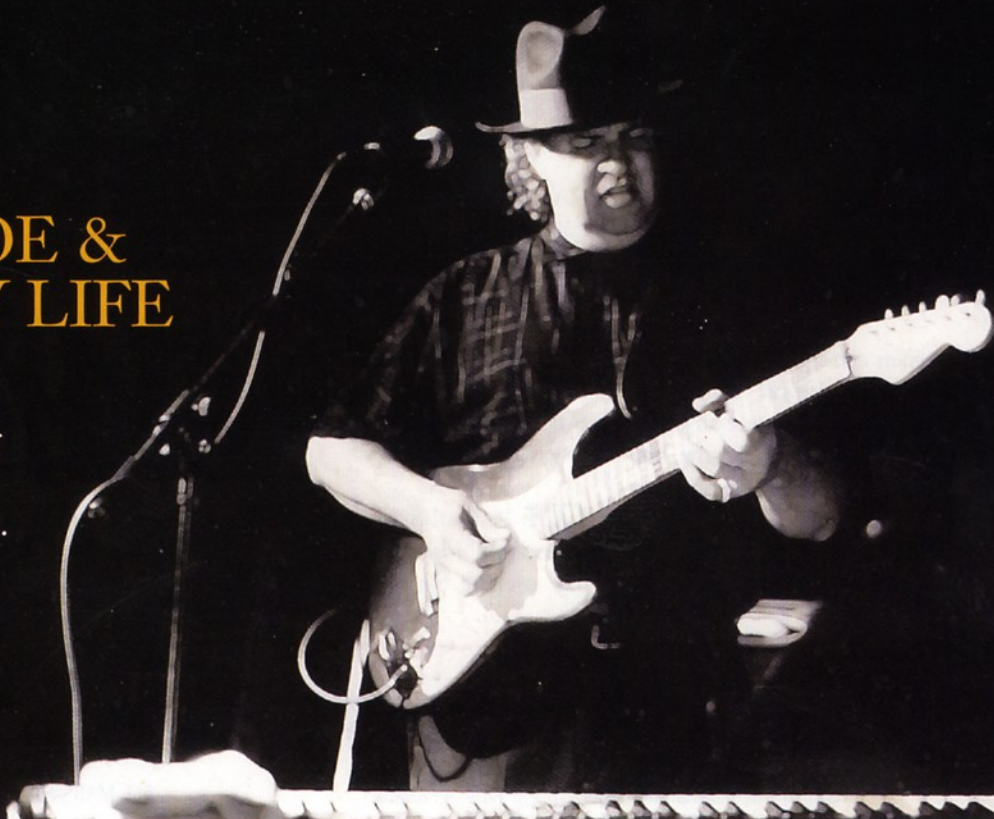


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SMOKIN' JOE & THE GYPSY LIFE

Joe Kelly's musical travels have seen him jamming with some of the titans of blues and rock 'n' roll. You can see him in Aspen.

BY SCOTT LASSER



IF YOU WANT TO JOIN the band of a rock 'n' roll legend, it helps to bring the goods. So it was for Joe Kelly in 1974, when he found himself at Bolic Sound, Ike and Tina Turner's studio on North La Brea in Los Angeles. Kelly had come as an observer; his friend was auditioning to be Turner's drummer. Says Kelly, "Ike came in wearing a white jump suit and about a quarter-million dollars worth of diamonds. After he decided he didn't want the drummer, he turned to me and said, 'What do you play?'" Kelly auditioned. When he stopped, Turner said, "Do you want a gig?"

The next stop was Japan. Kelly was 21. For two years he traveled the world, playing guitar for Ike and Tina Turner. It was full immersion into big-time music and the life that went with it. "I'd been playing guitar for 17 years," Kelly says, "but suddenly I was where stuff was being created. I had to go back to the basics and learn to play one note that would make your hair stand up." The social pressures were intense. Turner's legendary drug appetite was in full swing, and he tended to distrust those who did not partake. Kelly was also the only steady white performer in the band, "the first white musician to play on

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Soul Train, in '74," he says.

The band finally hit its dead end in Dallas, when Tina left her famously dysfunctional relationship with Ike. This time she didn't come back. Kelly, now 23, hung out back at Bolic Sound, learning from and playing with stars: Joe Cocker, Natalie Cole, Chaka Khan.

It wasn't a bad start for a kid who'd grown up without front teeth. At 8, Kelly left his set of newly minted adult teeth on a cement curb in Manchester, Connecticut, in a bike accident. He had to wait until 16 to get them properly fixed. This set him apart from other kids, and he poured the hurt into music. He played his first public gig at 12. Nine years later the chance came to back singer Judy Pulver in Los Angeles, and Kelly went west.

After the Turners he toured two years with Vicki Sue Robinson (of "Turn the Beat Around" fame), his foray into disco and away from his heart, which he found again when hooking up with Three Dog Night bassist Joe Schermie. They formed Bandit, the idea being to throw a bunch of styles together to create, says Kelly, "Latin reggae country funk with hard core rock 'n' roll gospel overtones in a blues basement." Inclusive, in other words

(except for disco). Still, the project collapsed. Twice. Kelly, "heartbroken," moved first to Denver, then to Aspen, in 1998.

Kelly is now in his early 50s, with long dark hair and some weight to throw around. Finally, he has the band he's always wanted: Smokin' Joe and the Gypsies. The trio of Kelly, Deborah Lasser (aka Zoe) on bass and vocals, and Chris Goplerud on drums, is sometimes joined by Chris Bank on sax. "I'm very protective of what we've got going. It's fat bass, fat drums, fat guitar. It's a great band, a band of equals." They play steadily in the Roaring Fork Valley and are working on original material, with an ear toward adding more Latin flavor, as fits the time and the area.

Fortunately for music fans, the fickle and capricious nature of the music business landed a band like Smokin' Joe and the Gypsies in Aspen's midst. Fifty-five years ago Ike Turner released a song called "Rocket 88," arguably the world's first rock 'n' roll song. With its bluesy beat and lyrics about girls, drinking, and cars (the rock 'n' roll trifecta), it sounds as fresh today as it must have during the Truman administration. When Ike Turner did a remake of the song on his Grammy-nominated 2001 album "Here and Now," he had Joe Kelly play lead guitar. Catch Smokin' Joe and the Gypsies and you can hear it live.