

The classic 1970s Kansas line-up. L-R: Phil Ehart (drums), Kerry Livgren (guitar), Steve Walsh (vocals and keyboards), Rich Williams (guitar), Robby Steinhardt (violin), Dave Hope (bass)

What was it really like to be in a hugely successful rock band at the height of the 1970s classic rock boom? **Kansas** guitarist and mainstay **Rich Williams** was right at the heart of the action and tells *Rock Candy Mag* all about the wild ride he went on...

THE GOLDEN AGE

THE 1970S. WHAT A glorious time to be a rock band. It's hard to believe that 50 years have passed since the middle of that marvellous musical decade, so given that *Rock Candy Mag* has now reached the milestone of a 50th issue, it seems appropriate to revisit the era. And who better to guide us through what it was really like to be rocking and rolling in America back then than Rich Williams, guitarist and the only ever-present member of Kansas throughout the band's 50-plus-year history?

Williams knows what a lucky guy he is to have been starting out in Topeka, Kansas in the early '70s at a time when rock radio was just beginning to wield enormous power and the be-denimed, long-haired youth of the nation were determined to spend much of their disposable income as possible on shiny black plastic.

"This is Kansas's 52nd year," the 75 year old tells me when I check in with him at his home in the Banner Elk area of North Carolina, right up in the Blue Ridge Mountains. "And I really can't feel bad about the fact that what we achieved in our '70s heyday is still what's selling Kansas concert tickets today. When we put a new

album out our fans seem to like it, but *nothing* really sells anymore. I can't possibly measure our last album [2020's 'The Absence Of Presence'] against [the band's highest-charting album] 'Point Of Know Return' [which rose to number four on the *Billboard* US albums chart at the start of 1978]. People went into record stores back then and bought albums. Now there's streaming and radio is all about pop, so Kansas hasn't been *relevant* since the '70s. But there's nothing I can do about that so I don't worry about it. We have a fantastic fanbase, and now they're all bringing their children and grandchildren to our shows."

There's something else as well, though; something that maybe nobody had anticipated with old-school hard rock having been out in the commercial wilderness for some time. And that's that suddenly all of the great music we enjoyed in the '70s has finally gained some modern-day cultural capital.

"We were playing a gig at Lake Geneva in Wisconsin," Rich tells me. "Outdoor thing. And there were all these young teens standing at the front watching. Well, I had

to find what was going on there, so after the show I went out to talk to them, asking why they were watching Kansas. They told me about this TV show *Supernatural* [that ran for 15 series between 2005 and 2020]. I never watched it at the time, but it was this gigantic cult hit and every kid in the States between 10 and 25 watched it. Apart from the very first season, 'Carry On Wayward Son' [Kansas' first US Top 20 hit in 1977, and an undisputed giant of the classic rock genre] featured in the last episode of *every season*. Then my wife and I were watching this show *Reacher* last night, and what do you know? They use '...Wayward Son' on that too. It's incredible. These things have completely changed our demographic, and all of it comes out of those early days of Kansas. I'm very grateful for that. '...Wayward Son' and 'Dust In The Wind' [Kansas's biggest US hit when it made number six in 1978] are '70s songs that have created my entire life. My wife and I live in a beautiful, gated community on top of a mountain with a nice home on two acres of land and with a world-class golf course nearby. It's just beautiful here. Over the years I've lost a

lot of money at the hands of unscrupulous attorneys and promoters, not to mention going through two divorces. When I went through the second one 15 years ago, I was pretty much broke. And *still* those songs from the '70s afforded me this place. Everything I now have was built on the dedication to sticking with it. But it was mainly built on the pillars of what we did as the original six members [Williams, vocalist and keyboardist Steve Walsh, guitarist Kerry Livgren, violinist Robby Steinhardt, bassist Dave Hope, and drummer Phil Ehart]."

Ah, those were the days, when a couple of hit rock records could sustain you for life. It's clear that Rich Williams has one hell of a story to tell about what it was like to live through those outlaw times when the rules of the mega music industry were being written by the main protagonists as they went along. So what do you say? Shall we just let him get on with it?

PHIL, LEGEND HAS IT THAT A KANSAS DEMO TAPE FOUND ITS WAY ONTO THE DESK OF MUSIC MOGUL, TV EXECUTIVE, AND LABEL BOSS DON