

PLAYING

Mick Montgomery does it just for the fun of it — but he has his whole life invested in it



Staff Photo by Walt Kleine

In front of Canal Street's stained glass window, Montgomery plays his quiet music, music with words you can understand

By Jan Hofmann

Mick Montgomery has touched the top. Well, the bottom edge of it, anyway. Like the kid whose daddy has lifted him, just for a mo-

ment, over his shoulders to inspect the ceiling, he has grazed it with his fingertips.

So he knows what it feels like, knows the rough texture of the barrier that separates commercially successful performers from those who, for whatever reason, are not. It's hard. He knows. He touched it.

But after a couple of trips up to touch that ceiling, he stopped asking to be hoisted up again. "Run along and play

now, honey." (You know how they always say it.) And he does. He plays for the joy of it; he plays because something inside him might well up and explode if he didn't. Play. P-L-A-Y. It's his favorite word, in all of its meanings. Play. He's serious about it.

He'd better be serious. Last fall he sunk everything he has, and some he hasn't, into play — for him, and for anyone who wants to join in — when he bought the Canal Street Tavern, for-

merly Evelyn's Corner Cafe, at the corner of First Street and Patterson Boulevard downtown.

Mick's play is music, some of it the kind that's native to Dayton, some of it the kind that has wandered in from The World Out There. It's not the kind you hear on the radio, at least not much of it, not any more. It's more like the kind you used to hear in the coffeehouses of the '60s. If you were here then and went to the Lemon Tree, the Alley Door or

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Where Musicians Play, Kettering Once Puttered

The building at the southeast corner of First Street and Patterson Boulevard was the scene of innovation long before Mick Montgomery took it over.

Montgomery and those who have helped him research the building's past have determined that it was probably the world's first manufacturing facility for automobile electric starters, invented by Daytonian Charles W. Kettering, who owned the building off and on during the early part of this century.

The site was part of the original 400-acre tract at the intersection of the Mad and Miami rivers granted to D.C. Cooper in the late 1700s by the federal government. In 1809, Cooper sold the land to pay off his debts, and in the hands of men named Patterson, Sinclair, Ludlow and Huffman, it became the city of Dayton.

The little street with no name that runs between the building and the parking area east of Patterson is known as Canal Street on some maps, because it was the Miami-Erie Canal in the old days.

The building was built by an A. Nixon around 1865, according to Ari Feldman, a local commercial real estate specialist who researched the building's history for Montgomery.

Feldman found no record of what the building was used for until 1926, when it was owned by Charles Kettering, and then Dayton Electric Laboratories Inc., one of



Staff Photo by Walt Kleine

Kevin Klose plays own work

the precursors of Delco (the name comes from the Dayton Electric Company.)

Ownership was transferred to AC Electrical Manufacturing, of Wayne County, Mich., and then to United Motors, the original name of General Motors.

Then it was transferred back to Kettering for a few years, after which it was owned by Delco.

Evelyn's Corner Cafe opened there around 1969, and served food and drink to workers at Delco Products until General Motors moved that facility out.

the Renaissance, you may have heard Mick play. That was before squealing amplifiers and psychedelics and soporifics and long before punk. It was quiet, thoughtful music, with words you could hear and mull over and understand, floating on a stream of guitar sounds as pleasant as a babbling brook.

The music has survived, at times barely more than an undercurrent, and, like Mick, it has grown older and wiser. "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are a-Changin'" have given way to songs with a more nearsighted focus — the wars nowadays are on a smaller scale, between lovers and lovers and ex-lovers, between sweet expectations and bitter realities. Personal, emphasis-on-the-lyrics music is resurfacing here and there these days all over the country in places like the Canal Street, places Mick calls "coffeehouses for grownups." Of course, most of the patrons don't drink coffee while they listen, but remember, these are grownups. And some of them *DON'T* drink anything stronger than coffee.

Mick, now 36, was a kid when he played Dayton's coffeehouses in the '60s — the kind of kid who grinned at the world and fully expected it to grin back. He still grins, but now when he does, there are lines on his forehead that didn't use to be there.

Not that the world hasn't returned the grin. It has, and at some of the most unexpected times.

There was the time in 1967, when Mick, just out of an aborted attempt at college, went to California. There he stood, on U.S. 101 south of San Francisco, with \$30 in his pocket and that grin on his face, his thumb pointed skyward.

"Where ya goin', man?" asked the driver of the first car that stopped.

"Haight-Ashbury."

"Where?"

"Haight-Ashbury. You know, where the hippies hang out."

"He let me off at the corner of Haight and Ashbury streets, and I just stood there. People would come up and say, 'Peace, man,' and I'd say, 'Peace, man.' I had absolutely no idea what I was going to do. I didn't know anybody there. I had no place to go.

"Back then I believed that if you're a good, honest person, you'll always find a place to stay and food to eat, and nothing bad will ever happen to you. I now know that if you're a good, honest person, you'll probably always find a place to stay and food to eat, but a lot of bad things are going to happen to you anyway," Mick says.

Mick Montgomery

Continued From Page 11

So after an hour on the corner, "this guy walks up to me and says, 'Mick, how are you?' It was a friend of mine from Dayton. I didn't even know he was out there. He took me to his house and gave me a place to stay."

Mick stayed in California for two-and-a-half years, sometimes playing in coffeehouses, sometimes in clubs, sometimes on street corners, but always playing.

The music was as communal as everything else was then. People sat around and took turns playing for each other, kind of a "you show me your licks and I'll show you mine" atmosphere. Nobody competed, Mick says. There was room for everybody.

Mick and a friend moved to Los Angeles when they heard they could get jobs there as extras for an upcoming movie on motorcycle gangs. "We heard this studio was looking for hippies to get beat up by bikers in this movie," Mick says. But when they got to Hollywood, they found no sign of it.

But Mick found more opportunities to play in L.A., in small clubs, sometimes for money, sometimes for whatever the passed hat brought him, sometimes in places where "talent" went to be discovered by recording studio scouts.

He played a club called the Troubadour in L.A., twice. Both times another obscure singer — Steve Martin — was on the same bill. Years later, Martin moved past the barrier and on to stardom. But long before then, Mick went home. The scouts who talked to Mick about his songs told him they weren't commercial. He took it as a compliment.

He teamed up with another singer and got a booking at the Aspen Inn in Colo-

rado, music in exchange for room and board. When it ran out, the two split, and Mick came back to Dayton "to start a place of my own."

"I don't know what I thought I'd use for money," Mick says. "It was in the dead of winter. Things were really ragged, man."

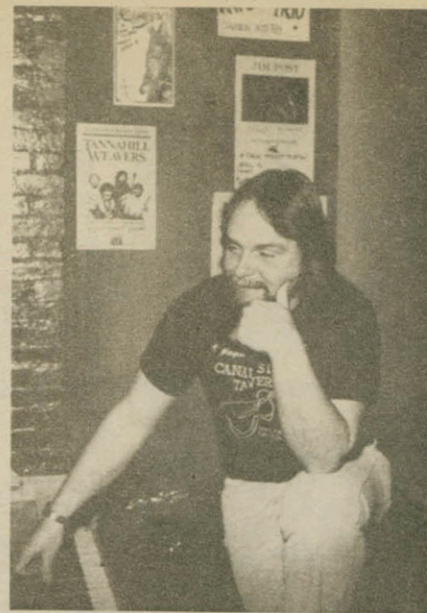
Mick organized the Terrace cafe in Yellow Springs that summer. Groups that are among the area's most popular today — the Hot Mud Family, for one — played some of their first shows there.

After that, Mick took up art at Wright State University, where he got a bachelor's in art education. Ten years ago, he was hired as a teacher at West Carrollton High School. He kept teaching there until he quit to run the Canal Street Tavern.

Nine months of the year, for more than nine years, he was Mr. Montgomery, art teacher, by day, and Mick Montgomery, musician, by night. "There were days when I would come to school and the kids would say, 'Hey, Mr. Montgomery, you look really wasted.'"

The rest of the year, Mick the musician did a lot of traveling. Sometimes he went on his own, to watch and listen at places like Canada's Mariposa Folk Festival. Other times, he went with his band, Sin City ("direct from Cincinnati, it's Sincinniti," a friend used to tease) and did almost well enough to give up teaching.

So there's Mick, once again scratching the edge of commercial success, or at least on the verge of making a living as a musician, and what does he do? He gives up the band and starts trying to get everybody to do it the old way, the communal, cooperative way.



Staff Photo by Walt Kleine

Signs of the times at Canal

But that's the way he is. Even when he's on stage, he's always bringing in other people's music, giving credit where it's due. Years ago, he and Sin City would be up on stage at Sam's or somewhere, and they'd start a song and somebody would yell, "John Denver!"

Mick would stop and gently correct his audience. "No, this is a John Prine song. John Prine, he's the one who wrote it. John Denver just sings it."

Or "this is a song by Jesse Winchester," he would begin on the next set. "Ever heard of Jesse Winchester?" He'd throw in a little background on Winchester, then do the song, or maybe a couple, as examples of the writer's style.

"I've always just relished finding obscure songs and songwriters and turning people on to them," Mick says.

So in 1978, Mick took over the newly-born musician's co-op at Sam's. The musicians played free, and so did Mick. Anybody, anybody could get scheduled for a 30-minute set, and the best acts got just as much time as the worst. Over 300 acts played the co-op while Mick was running it, and some of them went on to working for money. There was Debbie

Smith, who now has her own band, and a group of crazy-acting guys Mick introduced as the Slugs. The name stuck, and now the Slugs are among the most popular of local bands.

Before Mick had a place of his own, he kept busy looking. When he wasn't playing or managing the co-op or teaching or crashing, he was spending a lot of time checking into real estate. He looked at every bar, or potential bar, that came up for sale, and even some that didn't. He was looking at a bar in the Oregon district and ended up buying the house across from it.

Sam Young had been looking to get out of Evelyn's for at least a year when Mick showed an interest in it. After many months of negotiating, they agreed on a price. Young and his wife, Evelyn, bought the bar in 1969. Evelyn died six months later, but Young carried on.

"It's a place where musicians and audiences can interact on a personal level," says Jane Bates, who occasionally plays the co-op's open stage. Gary Reece, 31, a professional musician who enjoys playing the co-op as well, calls it "a place where a musician can do original material and not compete with a juke box or have to play the top 40." "Most of the people who come here come to listen to the music," says Kevin Klose, who performs mostly original material at the co-op.

Weekend nights are usually taken up with major but obscure acts, some local, some from other cities and states and some international acts. One Friday a month is reserved for songwriter's workshop, in which featured local songwriters not only perform their songs, but talk about how and under what conditions they were written.

On Tuesdays, the musician's co-op continues. The fact that the co-op at Sam's is still going doesn't bother Mick. There's room for everyone, remember? That's the whole idea.

Now Mick lifts the fledglings up to touch the top in his own place. It's his stage, his spotlight, his sound system, but for the moment, it's theirs, and so is the audience. The ceiling? That's up to them.

