

Al Kooper,
1966



AL KOOPER

A MULTITALENTED RENAISSANCE
MAN, HE HAS MADE AN ENDURING
IMPACT ON ROCK & ROLL.

BY RJ SMITH

“I wasn’t bound to a style,” Al Kooper has said. He was talking about his guitar playing but just as easily could have been talking about the totality of Al Kooper, songwriter, musician, singer, producer, band director. “If anything, I was known for being in the right place at the right time and playing the right thing.” Kooper has been at the heart of rock & roll’s time/space continuum for much of its history.

Born Alan Peter Kuperschmidt in Brooklyn, on February 5, 1944, Kooper was raised in Hollis Hills, Queens, where he soaked up life from the radio and played guitar in his first band, the Aristo-Cats. When he made his way into Manhattan in the late 1950s, and the hothouse that was the building at 1650 Broadway, his career began to take shape. This office hive picked up where the Brill Building left off; it was where the team of Carole King and Gerry Goffin, and of Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, wrote songs, and where Dick Clark, Alan Freed, and Don Kirshner did business. Kooper hung around, making himself “the phantom of 1650 Broadway,” as he put it, and finding fresher ways to be useful. There, he hooked up with the Royal Teens, older kids hitting the road in the wake of their 1958 novelty hit, “Short Shorts.” Then he printed up a card for his own “Ko-op Productions” and learned engineering by doing it. With the Drifters in mind, he cowrote the 1965 Number One hit for Gary Lewis and the Playboys, “This Diamond Ring.” He made

connections in the back of rooms, in the dead of night.

In 1965, the producer Tom Wilson invited him to hang around the studio for a Bob Dylan session. In the room was a Hammond organ. Kooper knew how to play it a bit, so long as he didn’t have to turn it on. But someone suggested trying the organ for a number and the organist had already shifted over to the piano, so Kooper quickly volunteered to play. Listening to the take, Dylan leaned over and asked Wilson, “Can you turn the organ up?”

“That guy’s not an organ player,” Wilson said with a laugh. But Dylan didn’t care. “Could you make the organ louder?” he asked again. That was the moment Kooper became not just an organ player, but the organ player on “Like a Rolling Stone.”

“One of the things that God gave me is the ability to ad lib, I don’t have to write anything down first,” Kooper once said. He would play on *Blonde on Blonde* and perform live with Dylan and Mike Bloomfield at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, when Dylan “went electric.” Suddenly Kooper had a whole new career playing organ, helping folk artists like Judy Collins, Tom Rush, Phil Ochs, Joan Baez, and Peter, Paul and Mary to plug in.

All around the country white kids were messing with the blues. In the mid-sixties, in New York, Kooper joined the Blues Project, a band that rehoused Black music in swanky clubs and on the FM dial, adding fuzz guitar and lysergic keyboard stylings to older, earthier sounds.

NEWPORT FOLK FESTIVAL



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: Kooper (on organ) helps Dylan go electric at the Newport Folk Festival, with Mike Bloomfield, Sam Lay, and Jerome Arnold (from left), 1965; the Blues Project with Danny Kalb, Steve Katz, Kooper, Roy Blumenfeld, and Andy Kulberg (from left) at Café Au Go Go, New York City, 1967. **OPPOSITE PAGE:** Blood, Sweat & Tears: Jim Fielder, Fred Lipsius, Randy Brecker, Jerry Weiss, Dick Halligan, Kooper, Steve Katz, and Bobby Colomby (clockwise from left), 1967.



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Kooper said the band jokingly called themselves “the Jewish Beatles” as they translated Muddy Waters (and much more) for a new and expanding audience. The music expanded, too. On the Blues Project’s second album, Kooper wrote the jazz/exotica instrumental “Flute Thing,” which decades later was sampled by De La Soul and J Dilla, rap acts claiming older music as their own – just as the blues had once been reclaimed by Kooper’s peers in the 1960s.

Time and again, chance encounters gave off brilliant sparks. There he was, handing Hendrix his guitar at Monterey Pop, giving Pete Townshend ideas for *The Who Sell Out*, and taking a bow for his French horn playing on the Rolling Stones’ “You Can’t Always Get What You Want.” He had his portrait painted by Norman Rockwell

and was photographed by Richard Avedon; on an album cover he even depicted himself as the Statue of Liberty. The face was familiar, while the sounds kept shifting.

In 1967, he became the music director and lead singer for a brass-forward group merging Ray Charles-style arrangements with Stan Kenton pretensions. Blood, Sweat & Tears’ 1968 debut, *Child Is Father to the Man*, features his strong soul ballad “I Love You More Than You’ll Ever Know,” which was later indelibly covered by both Donny Hathaway and Amy Winehouse. And by the end of 1968, he had left Blood, Sweat & Tears and was working A&R for Columbia.

“I hate the music industry. . . . I do just what I wanna do, and that’s all,” he explained later. “My motto that got me through being in the record business is that if



you don't expect anything, you are never disappointed. That's what has kept me alive all these years." Schooled by the interpersonal mishegas of rock, Kooper went from Blood, Sweat & Tears to masterminding Super Session, a jam band before the term even existed, featuring Stephen Stills, Mike Bloomfield, and an open call for sidemen. Super Session's 1968 album went gold and was one of the best-selling records Kooper ever made.

In 1972, he was on the road with a band called Meatball when they stopped in Atlanta. Liking the vibe of the town, Kooper decided to hang for a while. One night he watched a Southern band take the stage – Lynyrd Skynyrd – and they gave him all kinds of ideas. He said, "I was amazed. I mean, can you imagine walking into a real funky bar some place where you could get shot, you know, in Atlanta, Georgia, and hearing the Rolling Stones? And then finding out that they weren't signed to anybody? I just couldn't believe it!"

MCA had handed him money to start a label, and now he had a memorable act to put on it. He produced the first three Skynyrd albums and played Mellotron on the studio version of "Free Bird."

He took up producing new acts, introducing the world to the Tubes, whose "White Punks on Dope," he said, was

"in a lot of ways . . . the best record I ever produced." He worked with Green on Red, Joe Ely, Thelionious Monster, Nils Lofgren, Rita Coolidge, Was (Not Was), and Latimore. You could call him the ringer in the Rock Bottom Remainders, the pickup band of writers (Amy Tan, Stephen King, Barbara Kingsolver, and others) he joined in the 1990s. But he, too, was a writer, publishing an engrossing memoir, *Backstage Passes and Backstabbing Bastards: Memoirs of a Rock 'N' Roll Survivor*, in 1998.

There's always more with Al Kooper: his teaching days, his honorary degree from the Berklee College of Music, the screwball compilation series he put out of prank calls and found conversations that became a cult item among record collectors.

Singer/songwriter. Soundtrack composer. Session player. Bandleader. "The Ike Turner of the white world," Bob Dylan called him for his talent scout skills.

"For me, no one moment or event sticks out," Kooper has said. "I think reading my résumé every ten years or so is my finest moment – certainly my most incredulous. I cannot believe I did all the stuff I did in one lifetime. One is forced to believe in luck and God."

Tonight, we celebrate his multitude of musical achievements as Al Kooper becomes a member of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.



OPPOSITE PAGE: At home in Atlanta, 1973. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Producing Lynyrd Skynyrd: Ronnie Van Zant, Gary Rossington, Allen Collins, Kooper, and engineer Bob "Tub" Langford (from left), Atlanta, 1974; jamming with Stephen King at Kooper's 50th birthday bash, the Bottom Line, New York City, 1992; performing as part of " '65 Revisited" Concert at Newport Folk Festival, 2015; backstage with melodica, 1973.

