



# ROCK 'N' ROLL, CAESAR SALADS, AND A MISSED DATE WITH ROYALTY

The Canucks Ltd. look back on more than  
50 years of entertaining the Yukon

By Leighann Chalykoff

**R**ed Lewis, Ray Park, and Ed Isaak sit in a Whitehorse bar telling stories. They've been friends and bandmates for decades, so they have a lot to say. And they can't get through a story without laughing, especially the ones involving Caesar salads.

Lewis pulls out two marble-sized gold nuggets and tosses them on the table. "This is how they used to tip our waitresses in the old days," he says, "and we'd hold the nuggets in the bar safe until the end of their shifts."

This is just one thing The Canucks Ltd. have seen change over their 50-plus years in the Yukon. When they first came to Whitehorse in the '60s, they managed and performed in bars that are still around today, like the Kopper King, and ones that aren't, like the Rainbow Room.

It all began in 1955, when Lewis met Park, an up-and-coming accordion player, in Vancouver. They were just 17 and still in high school. At that time, Lewis played drums at a nightclub in Chinatown, where his fast hands had earned him the nickname "Flying Red Lewis."

Park and Lewis were fast friends, so they started a band called the Rocketunes. Their stardom was rising, and a gig at the Cave Supper Club—one of Vancouver's premiere music spots—landed them an agent, who booked them a U.S. tour but recommended a name change to sound more Canadian. The Canucks were born.

Left to right: The Canucks Ltd. members  
Ed Isaak, Red Lewis, and Ray Park.

Photo: archbound.com

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Over the next few years, they played the California-Nevada circuit, performing in Reno and Las Vegas and brushing stardom. They met big names like Jimmy Durante, they played backup on Doris Day's "Please Don't Eat the Daisies," and toured Alaska in 1958 with the USO, following Bob Hope.

They landed in Los Angeles with an apartment off Hollywood Boulevard and a boat-sized Cadillac. While there, they recorded the song "Never Before," with Lewis on lead vocals. It became a top song on the American music program *Your Hit Parade*.

When Park's wife fell ill, he returned to Canada, where he met Isaak, a bass player and vocalist. Isaak grew up in Langley, B.C., working jobs from pipeline construction to strawberry farming. "I've done everything, but the music got to me more and it led me," he says.

Park and Isaak formed another group, also called The Canucks. So, for a short time, two bands named The Canucks were touring the U.S.

Then war changed everything. "We planned to keep touring state-side," Isaak says, "but they stopped us at the border because of the Vietnam War." After a gig back at the Cave Supper Club, they were offered a job in Whitehorse and took it.

Meanwhile, Lewis was working in Las Vegas, but Park and Isaak enticed him north to fill in on drums, and he fell in love. "It was -42° C, and I was going down Two Mile Hill and was hit with the spell of the Yukon when I saw these floating ice crystals," Lewis says. "I called my group in Vegas and told them to find another drummer because I was going to spend the rest of my life in Whitehorse."

The trio leased the Whitehorse Inn's Rainbow Room and their shows—which included matching suits and dance steps—attracted turn-away crowds. "If you weren't in by 8 o'clock, you weren't in until somebody left," Isaak says. They also ran the bowling alley downstairs. "We'd play, and on our breaks we'd go down and clean out the alleys," Lewis says.



The Canucks in the early years, featuring (left to right) Ray Green, Grant Wilson, Ray Park, and Ed Isaak.

It was around this time that Isaak met and married his wife, Donna. (In 2015, Ed and Donna were named Mr. and Mrs. Yukon, an honour bestowed by the Yukon Order of Pioneers.)

Though The Canucks settled in Whitehorse, they still toured—a lot. "We've seen great northern lights because we used to play until 2 o'clock then pack up and drive all night to the next show," Isaak says. Over the years, they toured through Alaska, western Canada, and the U.S. and often took their young families along.

"We did our share of partying and drinking, but we controlled it," Isaak says. "None of us experimented with the drug scene—we were a clean group and were respected for that—but we did cause a few smells around towns," Lewis says.

Smells? The smells were from Isaak's giant Caesar salad bowl, which was an integral part of life on tour. "The boys love a Caesar salad," Issak says. Once they were in their hotel room making a salad (the secret ingredient: lots of garlic) when the front desk called and asked if there was enough to share because it smelled delicious. Another time, a maid refused to clean Isaak's room because the bowl smelled so bad.

In the 1970s, they built the ill-fated Showboat Complex in downtown Whitehorse (where Mah's Point is now on Fourth Avenue). "We ended up losing our butts," Lewis says, but he wouldn't change a thing because that's where he met his wife.

In the late '80s, the group started a popular Canteen Show, and when asked to play for Queen Elizabeth II's visit to Calgary, in 1990, they refused because they'd sold tickets to the show; they couldn't and



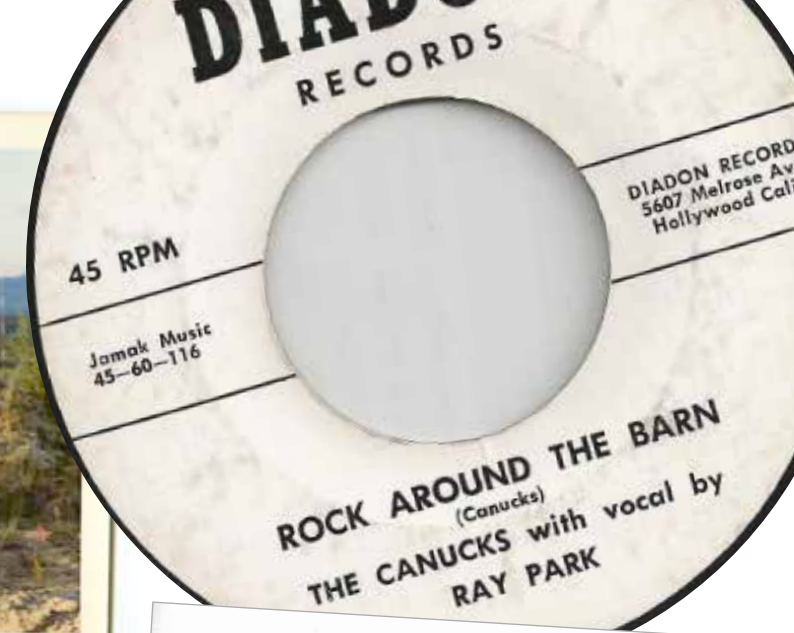
Above: The band poses in the Yukon in 1973. Right: A poster promoting a show at the Whitehorse Inn.

wouldn't disappoint their fans. "The Canucks were so busy they couldn't play for the Queen—how 'bout that," Lewis says with a laugh.

While the core members haven't changed, eventually the group changed its name. In 1970, the Vancouver Canucks hockey team joined the NHL. As the team gained popularity, the band adjusted its official name to The Canucks Ltd. to avoid confusion.

Today, The Canucks Ltd. still delight Yukon audiences, often playing with acclaimed northern musician Hank Karr. They have a repertoire of a thousand songs—standards, rock 'n' roll, country, and a little jazz. In 2007, they released their CD *Ain't Misbehaving* and made their YouTube debut, in 2009, with "Just a Gigolo," featuring a look back at photos from their career.

Over the decades, playing everywhere from barrooms to big theatres, they've developed a loyal following. For their summer concerts at Whitehorse's MacBride Museum, fans come an hour early to get a good seat. "Here we are today playing at the museum, which is perfect—we're the antiques," Isaak says with a laugh. Y



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