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WE HAVE A 'Donnie Iris SIGHTING'

He's your friendly neighborhood rock star

Scott Tady
Times Entertainment Editor

Donnie Iris is a rock star. More important, he's our rock star.

A living landmark, an approachable icon, Iris is a regular Beaver Valley guy who has thrilled us for decades from atop concert stages and then flashed us a grin with a warm and sincere greeting as we've gawked at him in local grocery stores, gas stations and watering holes.

Does Tom Petty jump on stage unannounced at Jeffries Landing to sing along with a comedian? Does Dave Matthews show up at Kelly's Riverside Saloon for a Halloween costume party dressed like the Tooth Fairy?

Nope, but our Donnie does.

Dozens of people risked icy roads in December for the chance to chat with Iris and have him autograph a case of his new King Cool Light beer during a promotional stop at J.R.'s Beer Warehouse in East Rochester.

C'mon, who among us hasn't bragged to friends after a "Donnie Iris sighting," even if some of those sightings are spurious, like



Times photos by KEVIN LORENZI

DONNIE IRIS, an Ellwood City native and current resident of Patterson Heights, has been in the national spotlight since 1970 when his band the Jaggerz recorded the hit song "The Rapper." He is pictured here performing at the Altar Bar in Pittsburgh's Strip District earlier this month.

the guy who called the WDVE-FM morning show claiming he saw the rocker squeezing loaves of bread at a supermarket.

"When you think of Pittsburgh, you think of Donnie Iris — King Cool," said Aliquippa native and popular rocker B.E. Taylor, who

performed as a duo with Iris in the late 1970s. "First of all, he's such a talent. And he's a really nice, down-to-earth guy."

Iris rose to fame nationally in early 1981, when the Ellwood City native and his band, the Cruisers, cracked the Billboard Top-40 with

"Ah! Leah!" a smoldering track hallmarked by a few of Iris' magnificent, piercing screams. Two more Top-40 songs followed that year, "Love is Like a Rock" and "My Girl."

Iris had tasted chart success before, as lead vocalist with Beaver Valley rhythm-and-blues band the Jaggerz, whose 1970 song "The Rapper" peaked at No. 2 on Billboard, while topping a rival chart, also earning the band a spot on Dick Clark's "American Bandstand."

The Jaggerz's success galvanized bands throughout the Valley.

"They showed us you could be from Beaver County and make it," said Rick Granati, of the Granati Brothers band, which toured nationally with Van Halen in 1979 and 1981.

Granati recalls being among the throng of aspiring musicians marveling at Iris' vocals and electrifying stage persona when the Jaggerz were playing gigs in Beaver Falls.

"Everyone wanted to be in a band like the Beatles. Well, they were the closest thing we had to the Beatles where you could almost touch them," Granati said.

CELEBRATE THE VALLEY



Times photo by KEVIN LORENZI

KING COOL

IRIS from Page G1

When "The Rapper" became a smash hit, "it was like somebody local going to the moon," Granati said.

The Jaggerz could have left Beaver County for an entertainment mecca like New York or Los Angeles. Iris and the Cruisers could have, too.

"But our families were here. And our friends were here," Iris said when interviewed in January. "That's really why we stayed."

Now a Patterson Heights resident who's retired from running an Aliquippa mortgage company, Iris has no regrets about his career choices.

Well, there's one thing he doesn't like about living here.

"When I was younger, I didn't mind the weather, but these winters are killing me," Iris said. "But that's the only thing about the area I don't like."

But when the temperature turns warmer, Iris is in his element.

"I enjoy the golfing here," Iris said. "You can golf a lot cheaper here than some place like Atlanta."

In summer, he's often spotted at Kelly's saloon in Bridgewater enjoying a beverage under the palm trees and grooving to whatever local band is playing. Such Pittsburgh groups as the Weathered Road and Sweaty Betty have juiced up their press kits with testimonials from King Cool himself.

"I just like being out and about," Iris said. "It's nice to see so many friends."

Rock 'n' roll remains a passion, and he and the Cruisers will spend time in the studio this year cutting a new album. They'll play select Pittsburgh shows, too. In the meantime, Iris will spread joy just by being our friendly, neighborhood rock star; always quick with a laugh and an encouraging word.

He's not fazed by the Pittsburgh-pronounced cheers of "Hey, DAAHnee EYE-riz!" that greet him wherever he goes.

"I hear that all the time. 'Hey, Donnie Iris!' It's funny."

Though for the record, Iris firmly denies that he's ever squeezed bread in a grocery store.

"That was just a kid who called up the station making a joke. But you'd be surprised by how many people have come up to me and asked, 'Hey is that true?'"

"It would be even funnier if it was."

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