



CANADA'S KING of rockabilly music, Rompin' Ronnie Hawkins has deserted the Yonge St. Strip. He's enlivened for so long. The

singer-bandleader has shifted operations to his London, Ont. nightclub. Here, he's shown on his farm residence in Mississauga.

Rompin' Ronnie Hawkins romps away from his long stand on Yonge St. Strip

By BRUCE KIRKLAND
Star staff writer

Ronnie Hawkins, that rollicking, raunchy, hard-living legend who's been entertaining along the Yonge St. strip for years, has departed. It's been two weeks since he left the Nickelodeon and the place seems lame now.

Not that Canada's king of rockabilly music and goodtime fun has abdicated his throne, it's just that he's moved his seat of power 110 miles west to London.

Rompin' Ronnie has been developing into a legend ever since he arrived in Canada from his native Arkansas in 1958. Born one month shy of 37 years ago in Huntsville and brought up in Fayetteville, Hawkins is now the only Canadian nationalist with a thick southern drawl and back-slapping, hand-shaking manner which disappears only when he's talking business with his lawyers or accountants.

In an interview before leaving for a week-long Nashville, Tenn., recording session, Hawkins was enthusiastic about his move to London, where he has bought the old city hall building and says he has spent more than \$400,000 to convert it to a restaurant-tavern complete with the Hawkins brand of entertainment.

"We've got two floors done now but eventually I hope to have entertainment on every floor," Hawkins said, his eyes lighting up like a child's as he thought of his new toy—that austere five-floor building on London's main drag, Dundas St. W. Bought from the city for only \$275,000 by his company, Glenn Taverns Ltd. (he owns 90 per cent, his manager Leo Sitter has 10 per cent), the 40-year-old building is now the Old City Hall Tavern.

A bit of a ruckus

Hawkins raised a bit of a ruckus in London, the oh-so-conservative retirement capital of Ontario, when he bought the place in July. "The city fathers looked up and said: 'Holy smoke, our old city hall will be a rock-and-roll joint.'" The unique Hawkins laugh bursts out.

There were also underground murmurs of discontent over the price he paid. The land itself sold for \$45,000 way back in 1908. The building was renovated by the city several years ago for \$895,000. And some observers feel it has more class than the new concrete and steel monument where Mayor Herb McClure and the boys have taken

up residence two blocks away.

Hawkins sees it this way: "The city owed me about \$1,000,000 when it expropriated Campbell's Restaurant and Tavern (for downtown redevelopment) and I only got \$360,000, so with the cheap price on the city hall, it all works out about the same." The knowing Hawkins smile washed over his face.

It really got launched last week but the official opening doesn't get off until January when Hawkins moves into quarters on the top floor along with his rock-and-roll band and retinue.

The band, always with Hawkins in the foreground on his stool belting out rousing versions of Forty Days or Bo Diddley, will play daily in the bar from 4.30 to 8 p.m., with long practice sessions Monday to Friday that have been the trademark of the Ronnie Hawkins school of hard work and good music.

Call him names

"There'll be some of those sessions that all the musicians call me names for—and during, too. They hate me for it, but they're always better for it after. It's 14 hours a day, like a boot camp in the army."

Hawkins will take only part of the band that most recently backed him up at the Nickelodeon. Pianist Stan Szeles and drummer Sandy Konikoff will make the trek.

Finding new band members is no trouble at all, especially with the wages Hawkins pays. When he played at the Nickelodeon, he took in \$2,000 a week and split half among band members.

"There's more rock-and-roll musicians than women and there's more women than streetcars and they're all coming along." It's one of those unique Ronnie Hawkins epigrams delivered with his earthy twist and simple language.

He always did like simple words. "After all," he'll tell you, "I only got to Grade 3." That's the entertainer talking—Hawkins actually was in university before dropping out to take to the road on the bar circuit in seven southern U.S. states.

"That's when rock-and-roll was first startin'," he said, eyes misty in reminiscence. "They called it hot country, then rockabilly and it was a while before it became known as rock-and-roll. The name conflicted with a church down there, the Holy Rollers. It sounded like they were using the Lord's name in vain.

"And in those days rock and roll was two peg-legs below a prisoner of war."

In the '50s Hawkins was dubbed The Dynamic Ronnie Hawkins, complete with the Elvis Presley style gyrations and flashy suits. The dynamo never quite made it like Elvis did.

So in 1958, when he phoned country singer Conway Twitty who was performing at the Fisher Hotel in Hamilton, he was told Canada had steady employment in bars. Hawkins came to play The Golden Rail in the Steel City.

"Actually, I had phoned Twitty because he had borrowed my guitar and never returned it," Hawkins said ironically.

Since then he's been an Ontario phenomenon, the best live performer around even though his many records just didn't sell.

And many of the world's best musicians started out in his bands, working under his firm but fatherly orders. The band began as The Hawks before moving on to helping Bob Dylan and then breaking out themselves. And there's been Robbie Lane, Tobi Lark, B. J. Cook, John Till who went on to Janis Joplin's Full-Tilt Boogie band.

And there are many more, including Crowbar, The King Biscuit Boy (Richard Newell) and, lately, Altkinson, Danko and Ford.

Guitarist Jim Atkinson said that Hawkins was the hero when he was growing up. "Then after I made it into his band he wasn't the wild, raunchy Ronnie Hawkins that I thought he was."

A gentle side

That's Hawkins. He has his gentle, sensitive side, especially with his family. His quiet, slender wife, Wanda, keeps away from the entertainer side and doesn't often go out to watch him perform.

She cares for the three children—Ronnie, 8, Robin, 6, and the 2-year-old baby girl—and feeds the guests who stay in the 168-year-old log cabin furnished with antique Canadiana that's nestled in the trees a stone's throw from the main five-bedroom home on Mississauga Rd.

The guest list has included some pretty weird people, like John Lennon and Yoko Ono who brought their ill-fated peace festival schemes to Hawkins two years ago, like Kris Kristofferson, Rito Coolidge, Joni Mitchell and a host

of others who find the seclusion perfect for getting their things together.

While Hawkins is thinking about selling the \$350,000, 10-acre estate and buying a farm near Peterborough, he vows never to give up the cabin.

He was there last week rehearsing songs all night long from tapes of original songs written for him by Kristofferson, Newell and a young songwriter from Hamilton, Roy Materick.

This week, the recording sessions, three hours each, 10 of them. And, like many times before, he hopes these are the ones. They may be. The tapes whirled and some very beautiful songs came pouring out—he only needed to duplicate that in Nashville.

Tuesday it's back to Toronto to receive the Cigar Smoker of the Year award from the Cigar Institute of Canada at the Royal York. "I'm proud of that," he said, chewing on the end of a big, fat Churchill cigar. "I win a year's supply of these so I'll probably smoke 10 a day when they're free."

A movie on him

The whole scene kind of makes you want to see a movie done about his life. John F. Bassett, president of Agincourt Productions which produced Face-Off, is thinking about it.

"We've got 15 scripts already," Bassett said. One of them's by Tom Reid, under the title What Time Does the Orgy Start? Bassett dislikes the title and finds Reid's script only half screenplay and half book. But the subject matter is fascinating. "Hawkins is a very interesting, colorful person."

Rompin' Ronnie agrees with that assessment. And he remembers Bassett and George Eaton when the two were in London and he played at the Brass Rail Tavern. "The two of them followed me ever since they were young punks," Hawkins said.

Bassett used to come in wearing an old windbreaker and scuffed-over shoes and never had any money, so I always bought him a beer."

Now Bassett's got a little money and wants to dabble in films. "But the difficulty in this one is transmitting the effect Hawkins has on a small, intimate audience who all know him to a large impersonal one on film," Bassett said.

If it doesn't work out the only solution is a trip to London.