



Never Lay Down Your Guitar

story by Cameron Zimmer & studio
photography by Sean Francis Martin

“Music’s been my whole life. That’s all I do. That’s all I’ve ever done. I almost feel guilty – it’s been so damn good.”

When Kenny Marco started recording music, the Beatles, the Guess Who and the Beach Boys were big. In the time since, he’s become one of the few to make a lifetime and a living out of his passion. He’s played a gig on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson and talks casually about when he shared the stage with rhythm and blues legend Etta James. But the Saskatoon-based guitarist, producer and songwriter has never stopped searching for the chemistry that brought his early bands acclaim.

“My ship never came in; I had to go out and swim to that sucker,” he says with a smirk and a tug on his antiquated Detroit Red Wings sweater. “And I enjoyed the swim, to tell you the truth, because the swim out there was when you met everybody.”

Marco first picked up a guitar when he became tired of the wheeze coming from the accordion his family passed around the table after meals in their Brantford, Ontario home. Soon he embarked on his “university education on the road” and started smuggling his guitar over the U.S. border to perform.



After playing with more bands than he can easily recall, Marco met up with three other drifters to form Motherlode. Two of the band members were from Ontario and the third, William “Smitty” Smith, was a draft dodger from Virginia who chose to create music rather than fight in Vietnam.

Like most groups, Motherlode gelled while touring. The bond that developed in their two years together paid off in the hit, “When I Die.” Although the song was originally rejected in the Canadian market, in 1969 it broke onto U.S. charts at number 18. Its serious sound was appealing to an America in the midst of the Vietnam War.

“I felt so bad that we couldn’t do it in Canada,” says Marco. “I mean we were so proud to be Canadians and we thought, ‘Well gee whiz, God you guys, you voted us out. You said that the record just wasn’t good enough.’”

“Our own country – God it hurt. It was a razor blade to the heart, that’s what it was.”

With its U.S. success, the song was eventually picked up in Canada and sold over 500,000 albums. Soon after, RPM magazine labelled the band as Canada’s

first supergroup. They enjoyed a rapid rise to celebrity, appearing on country legend Ian Tyson’s television show and touring constantly.

It was Marco’s first encounter with success. He has remained infatuated with the chemistry that produced it. “What I enjoyed with those three other guys, the creativity and where it went, the creativity that I know I’ll never achieve again – it’s beyond hurt, it’s frustration,” he says. “It would be like taking Hawaii off the map and never being able to go to Hawaii again. I love Hawaii, and between you and me, it can raise a little bit of water to the eye knowing I can’t go there.”

He attributes Motherlode’s kinetic energy to the influence of Smitty, who made a career of creating just the right vibe for Bob Dylan and other marquee artists. “That kind of player comes through your life once. It’s like Gretzky to hockey or Mickey Mantle to baseball. Except this guy was a behind-the-scenes guy. He made other people sound good.”

Motherlode and Marco went on to play with Dr. Music, a 15-piece group that impressed the Canadian music scene with a fusion of big band, jazz and rock. It was a blue-collar band that would play on Kenny Rogers’ show, The First Edition, in the evening and then trudge into the Toronto Sound Studio at eight

in the morning to record ad jingles. “We did every kind of ad from toothpaste to Cadillacs to toilet paper to Nescafe coffee.”

Never settling, Marco moved to Los Angeles to work with another musical comrade, David Clayton-Thomas, and his self-titled band. The band toured heavily, inevitably landing in some strange places.

“One time we flew from Los Angeles to this music festival in Rio De Janeiro. We arrived there at seven o’clock in the morning at the Cocoa Cabana where we stayed. Once we got off on the fifth floor, the doors from the elevator opened and here are some guys, leaning on some chairs like you and me, leaning against the wall with machine guns on their laps.”

It was September 1972, not long after the Munich Olympics where 11 Israeli athletes had been assassinated. A band from Israel staying on the same floor of the Cocoa Cabana had its own plain-clothes security squad.

“Initially it was fright night, the biggest scare you could ever have. But by the end of the two weeks we were in their room and they were showing us all the toys they had. Eventually they became friends and came to see the shows.”

After touring with Clayton-Thomas, Marco joined the star as he took over the

Grammy-nominated band, Blood, Sweat and Tears. The pressure of touring brought the band together. Marco recalls playing a gig on the night Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Middleton, Pennsylvania leaked radioactive gas into the surrounding area. The band was supposed to do a show only 20 miles away.

“I remember having a meeting and everyone was scared,” Marco says. “At that point and time nobody knew much about nuclear reactors, but we took a vote to see who wanted to do this gig. Everybody voted and the consensus was that we’d bus in, do the gig, and get the hell out right after. And I remember doing that.”

Marco didn’t stay with the Clayton-Thomas band long, but he was able to solidify his place in the industry and ensure a long career. “I’ll tell you what it is, it’s like finally putting you on a map and now people know where to find you. People start calling you for sessions and want you to play so you can create that sound and that chemistry for their album.”

After leaving these imprints on the music scene, he took the lead from his friend Smitty and built a career out of making other people sound good. He sang backup for a Reggae band called the Ishan People. He played through the early 1990s with a resurgence of Dr.



Counterclockwise from left: Kenny Marco today; Concert in Rio De Janeiro in 1972; Blood Sweat & Tears concert poster; On stage with David Clayton Thomas; Marco with Motherlode in 1969.



Music in a band called John James and the Mother of Hope. He sold music to two U.S. hip-hop acts. And he wrote songs that were later produced by Grammy winner Quincy Jones.

Since his wife Judith attracted him to Saskatoon, Marco has continued to help others make better music. He runs his own production company, Sunnyridge Music, and has a jazz band, The Kenny

Marco Trio, and a rhythm and blues group called Cotton.

Although he misses the creativity of the original music he used to play, he says his family is inspiration enough to continue. He doesn't regret his shift from rock star to family man, he embraces the progression. "That's what I draw from. It's an entirely different angle, but I tell you, it's every bit as

rewarding. And there's a lot less swearing than when I used to play," Marco says.

"Having someone say, 'Hey, Grandpa!' is almost as good as someone saying, 'That was one hell of a solo.' No, it is as good."

Even though Marco is satisfied with this familial groove, he still likes to reminisce, mostly because he has never taken his eclectic rock experiences for granted. The proof is in the hundreds of Super 8 film rolls he shot while touring. "I've got diaries of when it was really something, when you knew you were going to be seeing stuff that most other guys in the music business wouldn't be seeing."

Rather than leave these memories stacked on the shelf, he's putting some of them on repeat. He still collaborates with Clayton-Thomas, Brenda Russell and others he performed with on the world stage. And he's busy working with promoters to bring Motherlode and Dr. Music back together for classic rock festivals.

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This persistence is what distinguishes Marco from other professional artists. He's never stopped playing, never laid down his guitar, never turned away from what brought him here. "A lot of it's been burned out, but I still have a passion for music. I still love it tremendously." 🎸