

# Gary Kendall

## 'It's A Blues Life'

It started at the northern end of Highway 61, in Westfort, a working class neighbourhood in Fort William, Ontario, Canada, now part of Thunder Bay. **Elvis Presley** on The Ed Sullivan show in 1956, **Muddy Waters**, **Willie Dixon** and **Sunnyland Slim** on the CBC documentary "The Blues" ten years later. Music icons on a black and white television combined with a pastime of scanning the dial of an old radio, late at night in a basement bedroom, searching for exotic music from the American South. This is how **Gary Kendall's** journey into the world of Blues began. When other teenage boys went to weekend dances to meet girls, he stood off to the side watching the musicians on the bandstand. At age sixteen, six months after acquiring his first pawn shop electric guitar; he jumped at the chance to join a band called **The Countdowns** as the bassist. None of the other young musicians wanted the bass players job, Gary just wanted to be in a band and after making \$20 at a Saturday night dance playing instrumental rock n roll the road map for his future occupation fell into place.

When the mid-sixties brought the British Invasion, it was **The Rolling Stones** that caught his ear and their music encouraged him to dig a little deeper and buy records by artists who were considered to be the first generation of the Blues. He joined a band called **The Shameful Minority** with long time friend, guitarist **David Smyth**. The record collection now included **Muddy Waters**, **Howlin' Wolf**, **Elmore James**, **Willie Dixon**, **B.B. King**, **Little Walter**, **The Paul Butterfield Blues Band** and many more.

In 1968, Gary Kendall moved to Toronto, the city he now calls home. By 1971, as a member of **The James Hartley Band**, he was playing the legendary **Grossman's Tavern** on Spadina Ave and other blues bars in Toronto. The Hartley Band also headed out on the road playing the rough and tumble, six nights a week, five sets a night barroom scene that existed in those days. The **Downchild Blues Band** was at the top of the Toronto blues scene and he quickly became friends with all the band members, brought together by a mutual respect for the music and the art forms originators.

By 1974 he had become the bandleader by default of **Dollars**, a loose party band that played a mix of blues, swing and R&B. It was with that group while holding down a brief residency in a basement bar, The Meet Market, beneath the legendary **Colonial Tavern**, that a friendship was struck with **Muddy Waters** guitarist, **Bob Margolin**. (Muddy was upstairs in the main room), a musical connection that continues to this day. Bob arranged for Gary to sit in with Muddy and his band that along with Margolin featured top of the line blues sidemen, **Pinetop Perkins**, **Jerry Portnoy**, **Willie "Big Eyes" Smith**, **Luther "Guitar Junior" Johnson** and **Calvin "Fuzz" Jones**.

The privilege to play with one of his heroes is a strong and important memory that has stayed with him throughout his entire career. A few months later the basement bar brought in **Sunnyland Slim**, an artist first seen on television with Muddy Waters back in 1966. He was thrilled when his band was asked to back up Sunnyland and **Bonnie Bombshell** for a week.

In late 1979 the opportunity to join **The Downchild Blues Band** became a reality. The chance to play with old friends in one of his favourite bands seemed like a dream come true. He stayed until 1983, recording four albums, *'We Deliver'*, *'Road Fever'*, *'Blood Run Hot'* and *'But, I'm On The Guest List'*.

From the mid-80's to the early 90's, Gary stayed off the road, holding down a house gig at Toronto's, **Black Swan Tavern** with **The Kendall Wall Band**. A group he formed with ex-

Downchild drummer **Cash Wall** and harmonica ace **Jeff Baker**. The revolving KWB guitar chair was held by **Richard Smyth, Mike McKenna, Teddy Leonard, Kevin Higgins and Chris Burgess**. Their **Saturday Afternoon Blues Matinee's at the Swan** became legendary.

In those days touring acts came to Toronto for a week to play at **Albert's Hall** and most of those bandleaders came over to the Swan as special guests on Saturday afternoon. This stroke of good luck gave KWB the opportunity to play with **A. C. Reed, Pinetop Perkins, Eddy Clearwater, Tinsley Ellis, Little Willie Littlefield, Chubby Carrier, Bernard Allison, Eddie C. Campbell, Lefty Dizz, Eddie "Clean Head" Vinson, Eddie Shaw, Carey Bell, Fenton Robinson** and many more. This also led to **KWB** being used by that era's popular blues venues **Albert's Hall, Pop The Gator, Blues & Cues** and **The Bermuda Onion** as a back up band for **Luther 'Guitar Junior' Johnson, Snooky Pryor, Big Jay McNealey, Honkin' Joe Houston, Eddie Kirkland, Phil Guy** and **Cash McCall**.

In 2012, Gary Kendall dug back into the old and almost lost recordings of **The Kendall Wall Band** and released **The Way We Was**. A documentary on the recording process and the history of the band accompanied that recording.

(More information on The Kendall Wall Band, their recording and documentary can be found at [www.kendallwallband.com](http://www.kendallwallband.com))

In 1995, Gary Kendall returned to his position permanently as bassist with the Canadian music institution, **The Downchild Blues Band**. Since his return, they've released seven recordings '*Lucky 13*', '*Come On In*', '*Live at The Palais Royale*', '*I Need A Hat*', the Juno Award winning '*Can You Hear The Music*', '*Something I've Done*' and the '*50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, Live At The Toronto Jazz Festival*'. [www.downchild.com](http://www.downchild.com)

When not on the road with Downchild, he can be found occasionally working under his own name with **The Gary Kendall Band** or **Trio**. He has released two solo recordings, **Dusty & Pearl** and **Feels Real Strong** on his 47 Records label. In 2021 47 Records released two EP's, the remixed/remastered **Dusty & Pearl Revisited Volume One** and the compilation, **Instrumentalz**.

Gary Kendall received The Toronto Blues Society's '**Blues With A Feeling Award**' in 1993. He has been presented with the "**The Maple Blues Award, Bassist Of The Year**" in 1997, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2012 and 2013 and has twenty-five nominations in that category. In 2002 his hometown of Thunder Bay honoured him with the '**Thunder Blues Award**' and The Thunder Bay Blues Society's '**Keeping The Blues Alive Award**'.

Gary Kendall has worked on recordings as a bassist and on occasion as producer\* on recordings by **Chris Murphy** (*Blowin' The Horn\** and *I'm A Happy Guy*), **Little Bobby & The Jumpstarts** (*Tickets In The Glove Box*), **Maria Aurigema** (*Take Me & Long Way Home*), **Peter Schmidt & Shane Scott** (*Blues Approved*), **Brian Blain** (*Overqualified For The Blues & I'm Not Fifty Anymore*) **Ray Edge** (*Soul Connection\**) **The Maple Blues Revue** (*Live At Twisted Pines\**), **Son Roberts** (*Tell That Story*), **David Vest** (*East Meets Vest & Roadhouse Revelation & Devestatin` Rhythm\**), **Tobin Spring** (*Collective Blues Agreement*) **Braithwaite & Whiteley** (Blues Country), **David Owen`s** (*Living` Life\**), **Rootbone** (*The Long Road Home*) **The Mighty Duck Blues Band** (*Duck Soup*), **Judy Brown** (*Say It\**), **The Hogtown Allstars** (*Hogwild\**) and **The Maple Blues Band** (*Let`s Go\**). \* Indicates a producers credit

In 2021 The Hogtown Allstars, a group co-lead by Downchild vocalist/harmonica player Chuck Jackson and Gary Kendall signed with Stony Plain Records to release *Hog Wild*, that band's recording debut. HTA had been a Downchild spin off group since 2013 and included Pat Carey tenor saxophone, Michael Fonfara piano/organ, Mike Fitzpatrick drums and Teddy Leonard guitar

(Fathead, Maple Blues Band). Tyler Yarema and Jim Casson replaced Fonfara and Fitzpatrick in 2021. Howard Moore was added on trumpet to create the new version of the band when they became a recording act. (more info on The Hogtown Allstars can be found at [www.hogtownallstars.com](http://www.hogtownallstars.com))

Gary Kendall began his tenure as the Musical Director/Band Leader of the annual **Maple Blues Awards** ceremony in Toronto in 1999. During that prestigious residency with **The Maple Blues Band**, he utilized the position to compose and develop the group's own instrumental music. In 2022 they recorded ten of those pieces of music, a project that led to Cordova Bay Records signing the band and releasing their debut recording in January 2023. "**Let's Go**" has received overwhelming critical acclaim. As the producer and principal songwriter, this album has become an important and satisfying milestone in Gary Kendall's career.

The Maple Blues Awards show in 2023 was the final one for The Maple Blues Band. They will now embark on a new chapter as a touring and recording act. (more info can be found on The Maple Blues Band at [www.maplebluesband.com](http://www.maplebluesband.com))

Always a popular sideman, Gary Kendall continues to work with **The Swingin Blackjacks**, **The Hogtown Allstars** and **The Mighty Duck Blues Band**, never turning down a freelance opportunity that is creative and interesting.

**The Hornby Island Blues Society** has welcomed Gary Kendall to their annual Blues Workshop/Blues Week as the bass instructor four times. This event has become a very inspiring and important part of his career, which exercises his mentorship and educating abilities.

***'Whenever and wherever you find him, G.K. will be  
'layin' down a solid groove and playin' the blues'.***

[www.garykendall.com](http://www.garykendall.com)