

Kenny Roberts

*He's a walking contradiction
Partly truth and partly fiction
Taking every wrong direction
on his lonely way back home*

— Kris Kristofferson,



RICK LEVIN

A Walking Contradiction

Man claiming to be son of rock star John Cipollina comes clean

BY RICK LEVIN

Popular KSOW disk jockey and Cottage Grove resident Michael Cipollina has a confession to make: He is not, in fact, Michael Cipollina. His given name is Kenneth Michael Roberts, and he finally wants to come clean and tell his long, tortuous story.

For the better part of 20 years, Roberts — born and raised in Marin County, Calif., the son of an abusive cop father and a mother he describes as “disconnected” — has been telling people he is the biological offspring of late guitarist John Cipollina, whose bands include Quicksilver Messenger Service and the Dinosaurs.

The reasons driving Roberts’ deception are as varied and complex as life itself, and the outing of his secret — compelled in part by this paper’s investigation — has left this rangy, long-haired and well-

spoken man with feelings of resignation, relief and remorse, though he claims he never meant to hurt a soul. “I’m not out to fuck anybody,” Roberts says. “I really feel I wasn’t hurting anybody, but I was hurting the family, and I’m sorry about that.”

The immediate question becomes: Why? An outgoing and charismatic and talented guy himself, why would Roberts adopt the persona of Cipollina’s son and then carry on the deception for years? “It’s sort of a haunting thing,” he says, comparing his need for such deception both to an addiction and a disease. Or perhaps Roberts’ life for the past couple of decades can be considered something of a compound error run amok; like that unreturned phone call or infidelity unrevealed, each passing day makes it harder to do the right thing, until at last it seems impossible to shake the original sin.

But that’s only part of the story. In order to comprehend Roberts, one has to reach deep into the man’s past as well as the past of John Cipollina himself.

John Cipollina, named among the 100 greatest guitarists of all time by *Rolling Stone* magazine, died of chronic pulmonary disease in 1989. His name may not be well known among the general public, but Cipollina certainly carries great stature among musicians and critics, many of whom consider him the most innovative and talented guitarist to emerge from the San Francisco music scene of the ’60s and ’70s — a scene that gave birth to such stalwarts as The Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane and Big Brother and the Holding Company, to name but a few.

According to Roberts, his connection with Cipollina stretches back to his childhood in Corte Madera, Calif., when

he and his friends, hanging out at the train tracks, crept closer and closer to a Spanish villa up the hill. “We always used to hear music coming out of the house,” Roberts recalls. “That’s when I got turned onto the whole scene.”

The live music pouring through the stucco walls of the villa was being made in part by John Cipollina. Roberts, already obsessed with music, walked up and introduced himself. “He left a burn mark,” Roberts says.

Jump forward 10 years, to November 1982, at which point Roberts had become “a seasoned Deadhead.” At the famous Old Waldorf in San Francisco, he went to see Cipollina playing with superstar band the Dinosaurs, and after the gig he “met John again,” after which the two men “started getting closer.” When Cipollina’s roadie at the time, a friend of Roberts’ from high school, decided to get married, he suggested Kenny take over his job. This, according to Roberts, was in late ’83 or early ’84.

“From that point we were just inseparable,” he says, adding that it wasn’t uncommon for Cipollina to call his friend up in the middle of the night for, say, a ride