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 April 4, 2019  
 April 6, 2019  
 April 7, 2019  
 April 10, 2019  
 September 15, 2022  
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From left: David Ragsdale, Ehart, Ronnie Platt, Williams, Tom Brislin and Billy Greer of Kansas in 2019.



# KANSAS CARRIES ON

From Topeka to the world, the classic rock band looks back on five decades of success

BY GARY GRAFF

**I**T'S FAIR TO say the rock world didn't quite know what to make of Kansas when the band rolled out of Topeka 50 years ago.

The original sextet — guitarist Richard Williams, drummer Phil Ehart (who are both still with the band), guitarist-keyboardist Kerry Livgren, singer-keyboardist Steve Walsh, singer-violinist Robbie Steinhardt and bassist Dave Hope — looked like quintessential Midwesterners but traded in compositional and lyrical complexities that sounded like something from across the pond. Blending blues-based hard rock and intricate progressive constructions, Kansas staked out its own musical territory, at once original and accessible.

Signed to pop hit-maker Don Kirshner's label, Kirshner Records, in 1973, Kansas built its following with its first three albums, released between March 1974 and September 1975, and nonstop touring before 1976's quadruple-platinum *Leftoverture* and its massive hit, "Carry On Wayward Son," exploded, leading to the 1977 album *Point of Know Return* and its even more popular "Dust in the Wind," which reached No. 6 on the Billboard Hot 100 — the highest-charting hit of the band's career — in 1978. Those back-to-

back successes cemented Kansas' status as a stalwart of album-oriented radio and helped the group become a sturdy heritage act, sustaining it through lineup changes (nine additional members over the years) and 11 more studio albums.

The good news is that, at 50, Kansas is still playing the game tonight — and beyond. Fans consider the group's current lineup to be one of its strongest,

an opinion supported by its most recent albums — including 2020's *The Absence of Presence*.

Ehart and Williams say there's new music on tap for 2024, but at the moment they're reveling in a golden anniversary with last year's three-disc anthology, *Another Fork in the Road — 50 Years of Kansas*, and a celebration tour starting June 2 and running, so far, into January.



From left: Hope, Williams, Ehart, Steinhardt, Livgren and Walsh circa 1974.

**Does it feel like 50 years? Fifty minutes? Five hundred years?**

**PHIL EHART** Any of the above. (Laughs.)

We never expected to go this long. I remember Rich saying that, initially, we were kind of hoping we'd have a song on Topeka radio and we probably wouldn't make it any longer than that. So we never really had any expectations of going for a long time. But we've been very lucky and very successful.

**What has been the key to Kansas' durability, then?**

**RICHARD WILLIAMS** It's not like it was really a goal as much as it was an acceptance of "This is what I do," and then get up every morning and just take the next positive step to the horizon, really. Phil and I got into this because this is what we wanted to do with our lives.

**EHART** I think we're pretty doggone good at what we do, so that's a big plus. We've had Kerry and Steve writing great songs, and the band has been good playing the songs and recording the songs and touring the songs and everything else, and we're hard workers. It's just hanging in there, basically.

**So much of the story of Kansas is that it's not the typical "heartland" rock band that everyone expects to come from that part of the country. How did you wind up sounding like you did — and still do?**

**EHART** I think it has to do with the time period. When we were forming, it was right at the time the band Emerson, Lake & Palmer was coming out, Yes was coming



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50 YEARS  
OF CARRYING ON





From left: Steinhardt, Williams, John Elefante, Ehart, Hope and Livgren in 1982.

out, Genesis. That stuff was just starting to hit the United States and those bands were influencing Kerry, who was our main songwriter at the time — not necessarily that we would be copying them, but it showed us you could play different time signatures and things like that. We could do a song like “Carry On Wayward Son”; all the different changes in that song might not have been performed before, especially on a single.

**WILLIAMS** Everybody had different influences, very eclectic... but we were tired of playing the required music you’d play in a bar. We were very inspired by what became called progressive music. That taught us you can sing about anything you want to, you can use any time signature, any approach you can think of, any instrumentation that appealed to us. We didn’t want to emulate anything or copy the trends on radio. We wanted to do things our way — and we were very stubborn in that.

**EHART** The big difference is that Kansas was always a two-guitar rock band. Yeah, we had keyboards, we had a violin and stuff like that and could play proggy-sounding stuff. But Kansas is a kick-butt rock band with two guitars and lent itself to stuff like that — although one of our biggest songs we ever had was [the ballad] “Dust in the Wind.” But we would always do different things to keep it interesting. I think the fans appreciated that, too.

**Given Don Kirshner’s background with The Monkees and The Archies, he still seems an unlikely champion for a band like yours.**

**EHART** That’s true. We never had another offer; nobody showed any interest except him. We could never figure out what he saw in us, a bunch of long-haired guys in jeans, cowboy boots and overalls from Topeka, Kan. To this day, we still scratch our heads and go, “Wow. Whatever he saw in us, he definitely delivered.” He made it happen. He put his money where his mouth was and let us make very good albums, and they weren’t cheap. He gave us tour support. And of course he recouped, but the point is he believed in us and was willing to invest in these young guys. Man, we owe that guy a lot.

**That was an era when bands had time to develop and build an audience. Was the pressure on by the time you got to *Leftoverture*?**

**WILLIAMS** Kirshner was patient, but... by the third album [*Masque*], there was a little more pressure; the feeling was it was time to deliver. But that would never happen today, being given all that money to record three, four albums in hopes of something coming out of us. Donnie was patient with us, and *Leftoverture* exploded.

**Did “Carry On Wayward Son” feel like a hit when you wrote and recorded it?**

**EHART** Often I go back to [producer] Jeff Glixman’s comment while we were sitting in the control room listening... He looked over and said, “You know, if this wasn’t us, I would think this is probably going to be a hit single,” which was a brilliant thing to say — if it wasn’t Kansas, it would probably be a hit. But it was Kansas and it was a hit, which made it even stranger. And not just a hit in Topeka, but across the world.

**WILLIAMS** We felt really good about it — I mean, really good about it. Don Kirshner kept calling, and we were holding up the phone to the speakers and he was listening and everybody in New York was very excited. But it wasn’t until we really started digging into the mixes that it hit us: “Wow. This is something different. This is going to be a game-changer.”

**“Dust in the Wind” was an even bigger chart hit and, as Phil notes, very unusual. How out of left field did that feel for the band?**

**WILLIAMS** Yeah, it was outside of the box of what we had done before. It’s an acoustic song — no drums, just acoustic guitar, violin and voice. But we knew it was a great song. What’s funny in retrospect is that song and “Wayward Son,” we got a lot of heat from the press as far as, “Oh, Kansas has sold out.” By definition, selling out would be jumping on the mainstream trend and mimicking it. What about “Dust in the Wind” was mimicking anything to do with the mainstream? It was an absolute fluke that it was a big hit, extremely lucky. Yeah, there was a much more progressive side to the band, but this was just a different type of song for us, and we liked that. Even “Wayward Son” wasn’t emulating [any other] music of that time. We just stumbled into some hits.

**What was the chemistry of the original six of you that was so special?**

**EHART** Well, four of us went to high school together. We had played in local bands together, so we knew each other. Steve Walsh and Robbie actually didn’t live in Topeka, but we were all within 60 miles of each other. So the dynamic was six Kansas guys that had grown up in the music scene there; we had a lot in common and we hit it off not only personally but musically.

**WILLIAMS** We’d all been playing in the same or different bands, cover bands, etc. We’d kind of become the last men standing of our peer group that wanted to continue with a musical life rather than getting a straight job. The motivation was very pure in that we were living in the moment, not worrying about the future, not considering the financial aspects as much as making just enough to get by and keep doing what we wanted to do — our way.

**Kansas has been through a lot of lineup changes over the years. Was that the Greek philosopher Heraclitus pictured on the cover of *Leftoverture*, whose view was that change is the only constant in life?**

**WILLIAMS** Phil and I have made peace that change is going to happen: “OK... So what’s the plan?” And you make the switch and you move forward. That’s it. We’ve kept moving forward. Every step of the way was, “OK, what are we going to do next?” It’s just tenacity, I guess.

**EHART** There’s a small paragraph on the cover of our first album that says, “Kansas is a band.” It’s not Kansas featuring somebody or certain people. When Kansas plays, it sounds like Kansas. If there’s a bit of rotating of members under the moniker of Kansas, then so be it. So this time Kansas is going to be Steve Morse playing



**Top: Cover of *Another Fork in the Road* — 50 Years of Kansas. Bottom: Cover of Kansas’ 1974 self-titled album.**

guitar — boy, what a great addition he was. Or David Ragsdale on violin. Or Ronnie Platt coming in, or Billy Greer on bass. There has been a lot of different people coming and going, but it’s all under the auspices of the band. We go out and do what we do best, which is write and play Kansas music.

**Have you ever come close to stopping?**

**EHART** Well... no. We can’t find a reason to, you know? First of all, we love it. And when we play, people come to see us. We’ve sold millions and millions and millions of records and had millions of people buy tickets and come to our concerts. We’ve done really well, so we can’t find a reason to not do it. If we were sick and tired of it we would quit, but we’re not. **B**



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