

# SCENE

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"I was always crazy about music. I started writing songs as soon as I knew how to print. I was always writing songs and thinking about being a musician."

MOE BERG  
 Singer/songwriter

# Pursuing The Pursuit of Happiness

*First of a three part series looking at a Canadian rock band and its St. Albert roots with The Modern Minds*

BY SCOTT HAYES  
 Staff Writer

Nearly 30 years ago, The Pursuit of Happiness made a huge mark on the music world. Led by Moe Berg, the band played the kind of power pop/post-protopunk college anthems about lost love, broken dreams and yearning. It made you want to scream and rock out, still covering your beer lest the tears fell in.

Their biggest hit was *I'm an Adult Now* and my teenaged self's cassette tape Walkman practically had a big 'TPOH' imprinted on it. I might have been raised on easy listening/soft rock but this music helped me to grow out of that, and how!

It wasn't until many years later that I learned that Moe hailed from a fair burg that I was pretty familiar with: this one - St. Albert. That small world became a million times more exciting upon that revelation. Did he grow up down the block? Did he go to my high school? Did I ever walk past him and not realize?

## The liner notes

If you haven't heard *Love Junk*, The Pursuit of Happiness's seminal 1988 album, do it right now. I'll wait. It's 43-minutes of peppy rhythms, smart lyrics and feel-good sadness: melancholic punk angst wrapped up in power pop adrenaline. If you ever needed a pick-me-up from a sad split, TPOH would have the song to sympathize and energize you simultaneously. You'd still be down but you'd feel better about it.

It was the late 1980s when this band with big

St. Albert roots made a huge mark on the music world but it was 10 years before that when those first steps were taken on the path.

TPOH was led by the gangly and bespectacled wordsmith Moe Berg with straight hair down past his shoulders, a lanky kid from Grandin. He was a guy with a gift for bitter, biting lyrics, mostly about the pains of maturity, the struggles of love and how the world can let you down. If you ever lost a romance or couldn't get a date, he knew how you felt. At least that's what I imagine ...

When they broke through the charts with 'I'm an Adult Now', they not only immediately cemented their place in Canadian musicography, they rode that horse to tour the world, even opening for some major acts like the Eurythmics.

Before that moment could happen, Moe made his way through a heaping handful of other bands, including Troc '59, Modern Minds and Facecrime, all of which were infused with the same style and verve that would carry him throughout his entire career.

That career all started at Sir George Simpson Junior High School on Grosvenor Boulevard.

## Side A: The early years

"Back then, there was like 12,000 people living there. If you wanted to do anything, you had to take a bus into Edmonton. There was the Klondike Inn if you wanted to have something to eat and that was about it," is how Berg describes it these days.

Maybe some things haven't changed so much. The St. Albert of his youth has changed though.

"It was a whole idyllic childhood thing. Mom gets



you out of the house at nine o'clock in the morning and you came back for lunch and then you went out again, back in for dinner when the streetlights came on. It's the kind of childhood every parent wants for their kid."

But he had music burning in his veins and the fire needed to get out of that big town slowly becoming a small city. Kim Upright was there too. He was the son of prominent pianist and music teacher Lillian Upright, so he had always had tunes in his head too, if not in his ears.

Simpson had a variety night, he remembers.

"Once a year, they had these big performances where everybody would get a chance. I don't remember if there were auditions. They just let anybody in there. We were one of the few bands," he said, recalling his band Stones that he was in with Graham Brown and Bob Drysdale when they were only 13 and still learning their instruments. They might have been raw and unpolished but they loved to play.

And that's how they found Moe, or he found them even though he was a grade ahead and with his own act, called 55-6, a name Berg never understood the meaning of. It was some kind of in-joke, he thought.

"Two other guys in his band were already in high school," Upright continued. "We were like, 'Oh wow! This is a real band!' These guys knew how to play real songs beyond *Smoke on the Water* or whatever it was that we played. We had really simple material but these guys were playing Neil Young. They were playing real music. That was pretty impressive."

Berg doesn't remember it that way, downplaying it as just a cover band. But he was a songwriter first and foremost. Finding a tune to play his words to was only his second concern.

"I was always crazy about music," Berg noted, tipping his hat to his older brother and sister who fuelled his early rock star fantasies by letting him play their records. "I started writing songs as soon as I knew how to print. I was always writing songs and thinking about being a musician."

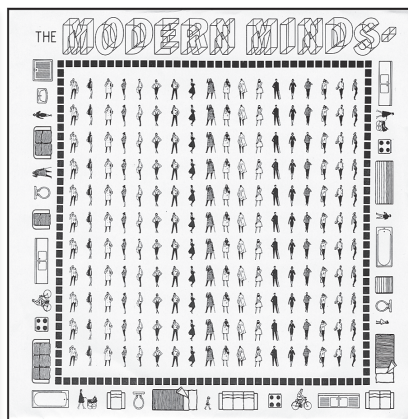
Former Paul Kane librarian and city historian Dave Geddes thinks of Berg this way: "A good guy with a creative side. Not too interested in getting rich and famous - I mean he was more artist than ... whatever."

But Berg was serious enough that he even took guitar lessons on Perron Street for a month, and then stopped. Maybe school just wasn't his thing. Music sure was though. Soon enough, he picked that guitar back up again and taught himself how to play. It was only a matter of time before he would shred like the best of 'em.

Now a self-starter, he needed more players. "I was just always into music, always wanted to be in a band ... so eventually I started one."



Album cover for The Pursuit of Happiness.



Album cover for The Modern Minds.



BRAD TRENT/Photo  
Above: The Modern Minds: band members Moe Berg, Kim Upright and Bobby Drysdale.

MIKE MITCHELL/Photo  
Left: Bobby Drysdale, Moe Berg and Kim Upright.

Theresa's World: Music and Lyrics by Moe Berg. Performed by The Modern Minds.

details of the heyday firmly locked in his memory bank but the gestation and birth of this baby is something that he'll never forget.

"We were a power pop band, kinda like The Who ... we weren't mods but we played to mods. We weren't punks and we weren't really playing punk music but the idea was that we were playing to this embryo of a punk scene in Edmonton, before the SNFUs and those guys."

They soon became a hot ticket in Edmonton, a place that at the time was notorious for not having many if any great spots to rock out. Mostly, gigs took place at hotel bars like the Riviera. That's where K-97 radio set up a program called the Riv Rock Room where a band would play and get a live simulcast on air. You can still listen to The Modern Minds doing their 1981 triple-R set at TheModernMinds.ca. There's even a video of the fellas doing a gig at Lister Hall.

The Modern Minds soon made their name across Western Canada, releasing the single *Theresa's World*, which rocked and attracted some good attention.

It had the frenetic drums and lyrics reminiscent of early The Police songs like *Truth Hits Everybody* with the earworminess of Doug and the Slugs in it too. Berg remembers it being listed in publications about what punk records to buy, so that was good news.

Those teenaged dreams of rock stardom were finally starting to reach fruition with these young adults, Moe's captive audience.

"In the Punk New Wave world archives, there's this idea that Modern Minds is one of *the* bands in the early days of the early '80s. Sometimes when you buy a book of punk records, you'll see our record in there like an encyclopedia of that."

Maybe the Modern Minds were too ahead of their time.

### The record got scratched

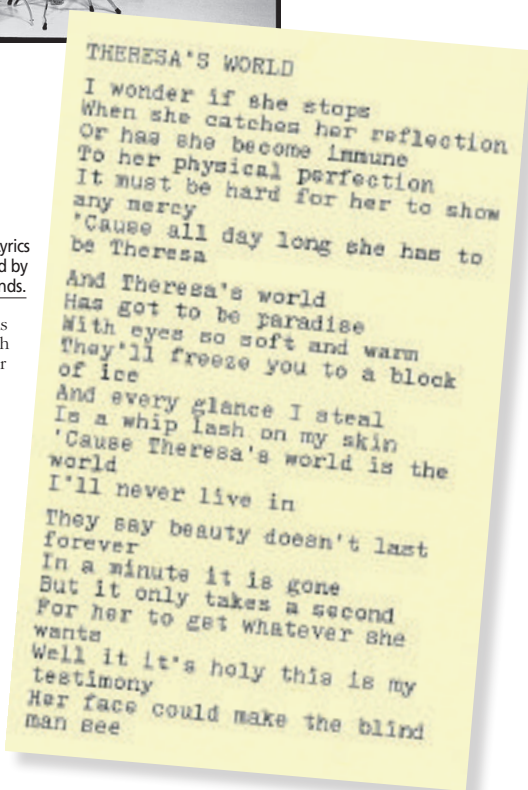
"We got to a point where we were getting interest. We were actually to the point of being managed by Larry Wanagas," Upright continued, mentioning the Edmontonian manager who would become a much bigger figure in the industry. "We were thinking that Moe's a great writer and we need to start thinking about record deals. We got pitched by Holger Petersen ..."

Sometimes, even golden birds just don't fly. With climbing comes gravity.

"Out of the blue, Bob just said, 'I don't really see this going anywhere,'" Upright noted with a sigh.

### Behind the scenes

This is the first of a three part series on The Pursuit of Happiness, its success and beyond. This first chapter will look at its roots while the second and third parts will follow in the next two subsequent Saturday editions.



Courtesy of the Paul Kane High School 1976 Yearbook  
Paul Kane High School student Moe Berg showing off some of his early musical skills.

Fresh from the talent nights and finding each other's strengths, Moe, Kim and Bob 'Bobby' Drysdale formed their first group, Hot Toddy, and started playing gigs. That lasted a little while before they disbanded, regrouping anew after high school.

### Ladies and Gentlemen ... The Modern Minds!

That big moment was January 1980, according to [www.themoderminds.ca](http://www.themoderminds.ca), Upright's website devoted to the history and the discography of the band.

The Modern Minds originally debuted at Borden Park the summer previously as The News but the moniker just didn't stick. They were a band with a Stray Cat lookalike (Drysdale), a young Keith Moon type (Upright, looking twice his age), and Berg who was perpetually clad in short sleeve dress shirts and glasses as large as butter tarts. They were reaching their red-hotness but didn't want to dissuade true aficionados from appreciating their dedication to their lyrical and auditory craft. The Modern Minds suggested a little more *savoir-faire* than the attitude they still proclaimed. It was a good fit.

Upright admits that he might not have all of the

They were only at the point of discussing leaving home to go on tour. They had already done a mini tour through Vancouver with the Pointed Sticks, a hot punk/new wave group. Things were on too much of an upswing for a sudden abrupt 180 halfway up the hill.

Upright speculated that Drysdale might have been facing some repercussions from his father, worrying about what kind of future his son was carving out for himself. Bobby told his bandmates that he was going back to school.

"We went, 'If you go to university, that stops us from being able to go touring, and to get ourselves out of Edmonton and start getting around Canada.' So that was the end of it."

Literally, that was the end of it. The band imploded just as it was on the verge of a supernova, or if not that, then at least some big marquee. That Lister Hall gig was their last one: Feb. 7, 1981.

"Bob and I were an incredible rhythm section together. I just couldn't see continuing on without him. 'Screw it,' I said, 'I'm moving to England,' which I actually did, eventually. That's kinda how the band broke up."

While they had actually faced some minor break-ups before that, Drysdale's straw was the one meeting the camel's back. No matter how strong, nothing holds up forever under the wrong kind of pressure.

Of course, the music never stopped. It only changed its tune.

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