



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of ROBERT HENRY "BOBBY" KEYS



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The following, written by Jim Graham, was published in his Born to Fly column in the January 2008 issue of Model Aviation magazine.

RC meets rock 'n' roll: Bobby Keys of the Rolling Stones

Bobby Keys is the saxophone player for a little band called the Rolling Stones and has played on every album the band has recorded since 1969. His sax can also be heard on records by Eric Clapton, John Lennon, B.B. King, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Sheryl Crow, Joe Cocker, Yoko Ono, and more.

I was unaware of Bobby's rock 'n' roll heritage when I started helping him learn to fly RC at my local field. But when you hear someone telling stories about John Lennon at the flying site, you know you aren't dealing with the average RC pilot.

Bobby would usually show up at the field with a new airplane, and he would ask me to fly his maiden for him and help him trim the model out. Flying other people's airplanes usually makes me nervous, but I always said yes to Bobby. I think I might have torn up only one of his models in the process.

BK: That was one incident, but we won't go into that. It was minor, it really was.

JTG: Bobby, you have been rock-and-rolling since an early age. You have been around the best hotels, the prettiest women, and the finest instruments. What is it about RC that draws you to the field and away from rock 'n' roll?

BK: I think I'm trying to capture those youthful days of yesteryear. I flew Control Line when I was a kid growing up in Slaton, Texas. I had a Ringmaster and a Fox .29. I would take 60 feet of flying wire, and I would get out there in the hot sun and spin around in circles. No one could really figure out what I was doing except me! I just enjoyed it.

My father was a pilot in World War II until the war ended. I always had a fascination with airplanes.

JTG: When did you pick up RC airplanes?

BK: You know. You were there when I started [five years ago]. I spent several years in Wingo School and Slow Stick School. I electrified my neighbors by flying over their trees and dazzled the pets in my area.

JTG: You told me once that you had a little bit of hard living under your belt and that flying RC gave you that same kind of thrill.

BK: RC just takes me away from myself. I am sometimes a pretty dark character to live with. To me, it's just a release. You don't have to do anything except watch a plane go 'round and 'round.

JTG: So, it's a better way to get your adrenaline going?

BK: I get more excited about flying RC airplanes now than I do playing rock 'n' roll. After 50 years of it you get used to it.

JTG: What kind of airplanes are you flying these days?

BK: I have some new ones with me. I have a Spacewalker and a Sopwith.

It's the first time I have tried four-stroke engines and everyone is telling me, "That's very complicated, young man. You want to make sure you are ready for this. Can you read?"

So I read but it doesn't do any good. I still have to come to people like you. I can't figure out the bottom end or the top end. There are people on this planet that have that knack, and I'm not one of them.

JTG: What is the next level for you in RC?

BK: Ultimately I'd like to fly multiple engines. I'd like to fly bigger and louder. I enjoy flying everything now. I have a lot of airplanes. I just haven't flown them yet. I guess I have 16 or 17 planes right now.

JTG: I was approached at one point to be a roadie for Bobby on the last Rolling Stones tour. I have worked in the music business and have long hair, so I met all of the requirements, but musical talent was not what Bobby was looking for. Bobby, why did you really want me to be a roadie?

BK: Well, see, we have a lot of time on the road. We usually play only two or three concerts a week and we spend an equal amount of time not doing anything, so we sit around in hotel rooms in various cities around the world. I always take a simulator, and after a while that gets boring too. I was trying to figure out a way [points to the author] to incorporate a roadie/air tech/advisor.

The Stones were like, "Wait a minute, what do you need a sax tech for?" I said, "Well, because, don't you know how the saxophone works? I need someone to carry it." They said I needed a Sherpa.

It wasn't the Stones that weren't buying it; it was the business manager. So try as I might, I could not get my roadie/air tech aboard on this last one.

JTG: I want all of you out there to imagine this scenario if it were to happen to you. You are approached by one of the Rolling Stones' band members, and you get to travel with the Stones all over the world. Your job is to maintain RC airplanes and make sure they are ready to fly at all times. That would be the ultimate RC gig.

BK: Listen man, we would have had it knocked in the head if only Mick [Jagger], Keith [Richards], or Charlie [Watts] had taken RC up. Now I campaign with Keith a little bit with little response. Mick, no response either. Charlie just likes to look at them.

JTG: I envisioned a big road box full of RC airplanes, radios, and chargers.

BK: We shared the same vision! It didn't come to pass, did it?

JTG: So have you pulled out an RC airplane in front of Mick and Keith and said, "Hey, I want you to check this out?"

BK: We played down in Louisville [Kentucky] at Churchill Downs. Charlie and Mick were saying, "Oooh! Ah!" and I was flying a Hobby Lobby Eagle. I thrilled the crowds, but not enough to keep Mick and Charlie's interest to let me have my own air tech.

JTG: What was your first band?

BK: First time I ever played with a band was with a guy named Buddy Holly. They were going to a radio station in Lubbock, Texas, to record a record. Buddy said "Well, we might need a saxophone; these other bands have saxophones. Bobby, you got one?"

JTG: How old were you then?

BK: I was 14. No, 13 actually.

JTG: How did you get from Buddy Holly to the Stones?

BK: There's a lot of in between, but I met the Stones in San Antonio, Texas, in 1964 or 1965. The single they had out at the time was a song called "Not Fade Away," which was a Buddy Holly song. We were staying in rooms adjacent to each other. I was around 18 or 19 years old at the time.

That is when I met Keith and Brian [Jones]. They were in the room next to me. Keith and I found out that we have the same birthdate in the same year. We bonded over that startling revelation.

JTG: How long have you been on the road with the Stones?

BK: I started recording with them in 1968 on "Let It Bleed," and I started touring with them in 1970. It has been a steady job since then.

JTG: What do you think your most famous saxophone lead is? "Brown Sugar," maybe?

BK: "Brown Sugar" pays the rent. It is something that everyone recognizes.

JTG: There is something else you are famous for that is a little more dubious. Can you tell me about that?

BK: One night myself and my able-bodied assistant Keith Richards found that the nonfunctioning TV in our hotel room was taking up valuable space where we could store beer and whiskey. So out the window it went. That deed has followed us ever since. People will say, “You’re not the guy that played so-and-so; you’re the guy that threw the TV out the window!”

JTG: How many TVs have you thrown out of windows?

BK: Just one! It made me famous for life. One is all you need.

JTG: You and [The Beatles’] John Lennon crossed paths back in the day, right?

BK: Ah yeah, I met John a long time ago. Of course everything was a long time ago. I rented some property in England that was adjacent to his and Yoko’s; that is when we got to know each other and hung out. We used to get together in the afternoon. It was our approach to meditation.

I was sort of out of the loop with Yoko until one day John came over and said, “Get your saxophone; Yoko has a spot for you on her new album.” I thought, sarcastically, “Oh thank you, Yoko.” Yoko’s music was a little out of strike to say the least.

So they put the music on, and it was just a bunch of sounds and stuff. I’m looking at John and he’s looking at me, so I put my horn together and just hit the lowest note I could, and Yoko goes, “That’s it! That’s it! You have found my frog!” So I played a bullfrog on Yoko’s record, and it made it so John and I could play around together again.

JTG: What would you say to the beginners out there just starting out in RC?

BK: Find somebody that knows what they are doing with the patience of Job and start out slow and build up. Find an elementary airplane with three or four channels and learn the basics. It’s just like readin’, writin’, and ‘rithmetic.

JTG: What is next for you and the Stones?

BK: We are going to do some more recording and have a tour projected for next spring.

JTG: Bobby, thanks. I have always wanted to interview you.

BK: Thank you, Jim T., and happy landings!

“I get more excited about flying RC airplanes now than I do playing rock and roll,” he said.

Since Bobby was a teenager he has traveled around the globe in the world’s most famous rock band. He has been able to take advantage of some of the best things this world has to offer, yet at the end of the day the thing he wants to do when he has spare time is fly his RC airplanes. The same tranquility and adrenaline rush we get from RC is the same for Bobby.

It is amazing that RC is as addictive to the school kid who looks to the sky every time an airplane flies over as it is to a member of the Rolling Stones who flies from show to show in a private jet. The thrill of RC transcends all lifestyles.

Does Bobby make flying RC a little bit cooler? You bet, but flying an RC airplane because it is something you love to do is the coolest thing of all.

You can view full-length video of this interview on RCGroups.com

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