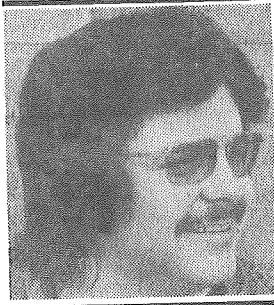


# Guitarist is a pebble 'in the sands of time'

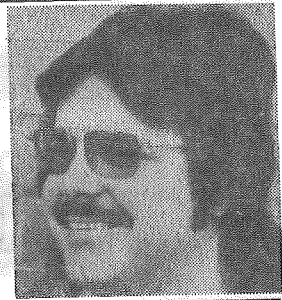


## a v.i.p. and me

(very interesting person)

By KATHLEEN A. HICKS

"Working with Ronnie, you get a lot of exposure. It is a big opportunity for musicians to become known and discovered. Ronnie is the first one to promote them and he will never hold anyone back. He always says, 'If you get a better job offer, by all means take it.' He never jeopardizes anyone's career."



### AL BRISCOE:

Leader — Rompin' Ronnie Hawkins Band  
Freelance Steel Guitarist

**ME:** Rompin' Ronnie Hawkins started in show business in 1955. How long have you been leading his orchestra?

**AL:** It will be two years exactly this week. Two years ago, Ronnie was putting together a whole new unit, and he had heard of me through other musicians and he came in to hear me play one night. He asked me to join him, and I said okay. I was very thrilled. Being the leader of his band, I keep the books, I'm paymaster, in other words, the straw boss and I look after his business in that way. I play and run the sound system. I work a little with arrangements, but our piano player mainly handles the arrangements, because he has 18 years of classical training. We have six in the group now. We have had as many as ten and Ronnie, but as the job requirements fluctuate, we vary. It seems like a never ending quest; people come and go in this business — it is a very transient business. Out of the original group he put together two years ago, there aren't any left except myself.

**ME:** The band started out as "The Hawks". What are you called now?

**AL:** We are called "Elephant". We just renamed the group a year ago. There are a lot of groups being named for animals; it could be interpreted as a heavy group. It has pretty well been called the Hawks all along. When his big original band left him, back in '65 who are now "The Band" and have backed up Bob Dylan and have been working on their own — they are now a \$100,000 a night act — he put together another group called Robbie Lane and the Disciples, who have played around for quite awhile now, and have gone on to do their own thing. "The Band" would be the most famous that he started. There's "Full Tilt Boogie Band", who backed up Janis Joplin, who is now dead. "Sky Lark" who had a big hit last year called "Wild Flower" Another off-shoot of that band were "Atkins, Denko and Ford" who are now called "Barefoot". Another local group from Hamilton called "Crowbar", which are now called "Bad Manners". He started all these people on their way, and they have gone on to do well.

**ME:** Do you play most instruments or lean to one in particular?

**AL:** I lean to the pedal steel guitar; it is a modified Hawaiian guitar. Pedals were added around 1958, so it is a relatively new instrument. I never took lessons, I picked it all up myself from listening to records. I

started it about ten years ago. A sort of side line I have is that I help build steel guitars that I play and they are built here in Mississauga out of a fellow's basement, Eddie Fulawka. It's a hobby for him. He is a forman at Massey-Ferguson. About seven years ago, two years before I moved into Mississauga, I was living on the boundary in Markland Woods in Etobicoke, and I heard about Eddie and I needed repairs to my guitar, which was made in Nashville. I went over there, and he was really great and had a lot of good ideas, so I started helping him out. I really believe in his workmanship and product and I promote him whenever and wherever I can.

**ME:** Where did you get your musician start?

**AL:** My mother made me take piano lessons when I was seven or eight, for 4½ years. Then I finally reached the point where I wasn't really interested anymore and wanted to quit. If I had known what it could have done for me, I would have continued today, but I am getting back to it now. After stopping piano, I picked up the Spanish guitar and learned a little on it. When I was about 16, I started bass and I did bass and piano for about four years. Then I picked up the steel and I have been doing it ever since. I am taking piano seriously now, mainly to learn my theory and to get back to reading music so I can apply it to the steel guitar.

**ME:** Do you basically stick to Rock and Roll or are you changing with the times?

**AL:** Up until the time I joined Ronnie, I had only been involved mainly with Country music. Then I got into the Rock and Roll, the Blues and a little more pop stuff. So therefore, I looked on it as a widening of my scope, because we play quite a variety of music. It fluctuates; for one to come in to hear us and get a right idea as to what our group can do, you have to really listen to it for a whole evening. The more people

you have in a group, the longer it takes to get everyone featured. Ronnie, of course, is very famous for that; he shows off every one of his musicians to the fullest. There is no such thing as a star complex on his behalf. He is the most down to earth person — very humble.

**ME:** With all the travelling involved, how did you condition yourself to an on-the-move existence?

**AL:** I left home and went on the road when I was 20, and I was playing in bars underage. I suppose when you are that age, well, I never really thought about it. I think you are a bit more adventurous, and when you are young, you adjust to things much more easily than when you get set in your ways. The way I look at it is that whatever it takes to get the job done then that is what you have to do.