

THE KING OF QUEEN

Performer, musician, video artist, author, critic, gadabout, friend—the westend’s boheme is in the soul of Andrew J. Paterson. If you don’t know Andy, then you don’t know Queen West.

By Gerald Hannon

Perhaps he was a cat in a previous life. He seems to think so—though without manifesting the usual previous-life, dewy-eyed flake factor. We are sitting in the Tequila Bookworm on Queen Street West in Toronto, Andrew James Paterson and I, and he has just said, “I’m sure I was a cat in my last life,” a statement which constituted an abrupt segue from the revelation that he is allergic to butter, eggs, and cheese, which prompted the footnote that he’s been told that said allergy is actually a neurosis, since it began when his brother was born which somehow, and I’ve lost track of how, has landed us delicately among the cats with, lest I forget, a brief portage in the direction of dogs (“I’ve always had a distrust of dogs,” he says. “I was bitten by a dog when I was quite young”) but with the, to me, inexplicable conversational destination, not yet quite in sight, of how he remembers where he was and what he was doing when Princess Di was killed (watching the *Larry Sanders Show*) and when Trudeau died (attending a book launch).

The cat thing is beginning to work for me (though if there’s a separated-at-birth cartoon connection, it’s more Porky Pig, minus the stuttering hysteria, than, say, Sylvester). I can begin to picture him, a stray for sure, a city cat, alley bound, sniffing, moving from tarmac to fence top to the small dark worlds beneath cars, alert, watching (the only cat in town with a permanent squint), lingering at windows lit and dazzling in their hopeless innocence, an explorer of secret places, never staying long, never savouring quite enough night.

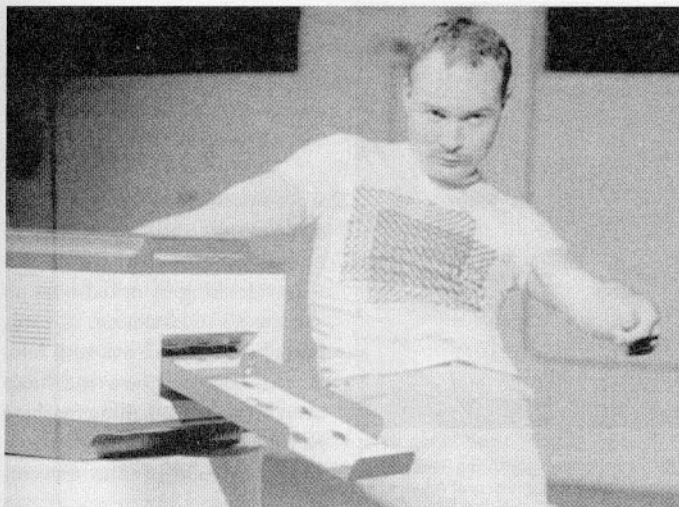
The cat thing is beginning to work for me—it being easy, if a little mean, to make the comparison between Andy’s residence of some twenty-one years—room number seven above the Cameron Public House on Queen West, where he also works Monday and Tuesday nights in a service capacity—and a litter box desperately in need of attention. Which role it has actually played, Mr. Paterson having owned a cat, Mr. Gato, now gone to cat heaven, who shared his digs for a decade and have I read, he asks, the Patricia Highsmith short stories about

Facing page: Andrew J. Paterson on the roof of the Cameron Public House, October 2002. Photo: Jamie Veeneman. Left: Andy at the after party of a 222 Warehouse event, 1980. Photo courtesy of A Space.









Facing page: The Government performing at Video Cabaret c.1978. (From left: Robert Stewart, Ed Boyd, Andy) Photo courtesy of A Space. Above left: Andy and a photocopier during his performance *Coffee Break*, 1980. Co-presented by A Space and 222 Warehouse. Photo courtesy of A Space. Above right: Video still of Andy playing two characters at once in *Cash and Carry*, 2000. Courtesy of Vtape.

vengeful animals? Have I mentioned that Andrew J. Paterson has never had a driver's licence? That he has things to say about power steering?

That he has things to say about almost everything? That he is as text-based as most of his work in music, video, and performance. That you can't know Queen West without knowing Andrew Paterson—and not simply because he is and has been a fixture (have a party, an opening, a launch and Andy's there. If he isn't, consider *seppuku*), but because what is best about that frame we think of as Queen West is what is best about Andrew James Paterson. It isn't that complicated, really. It is a version of what anthropologists call gift culture.

Andrew James Paterson, who describes himself as “an interdisciplinary time-based artist ... concerned with exchange systems and shifting boundaries between public and private spaces,” turned fifty years old this past April 23 (sharing a birthday, he points out, with Shakespeare and General Idea artist Felix Partz). He'll tell you he was born in Toronto's Wellesley Hospital at 1:13 a.m., and then he will tell you that April 23 is normally day number 113 of the year which would have been perfect except that 1952 was a leap year, making April 23 day number 114. As a child, he tried to predict the weather with his numerological system. It didn't work.

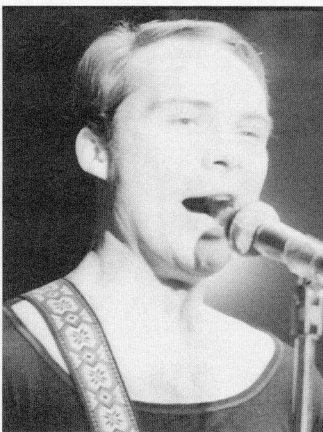
He had what you might call an ordinary suburban upbringing. His father was a professor of pharmaceutical chemistry at U of T. His mother taught public school until children came along (he has a younger brother, now a computer programmer). She was also a painter, and he keeps one of her paintings, a portrait, tucked behind

his bed. They sent him to a private school, Royal St. George's College, where he seems to have been alternately out of it and cool (this last bolstered by drug experimentation and guitar lessons), where he went through what he calls “a bit of a red-neck period where I thought beer was good. Booze was good. Drugs were for stupid hippies and you had to listen to blues,” where he did a bit of sexual adventuring with a male friend, and where he also had “adventures with girls behind the hydro station.”

He describes himself as “a real film nerd, especially at university” (a status he has clearly maintained. As Vtape director Kim Tomczak says, “he has an encyclopedic knowledge of noir film—he knows the dialogue, knows them scene by scene and shot by shot. You'd expect that from a film scholar, but he's not. He's an enthusiast”). Graduated, general BA in literature and philosophy, missed the ceremony (“I was

Some of the songs I didn't like much became unexpectedly popular

washing dishes at Ontario Place and developing a taste for cocktails that people hadn't finished”) and though he says he has “a conflicted attitude towards entertainment,” he had also become a good guitar player, and was still tantalized by serious high school rock star fantasies. Played for a while in band called Flivva (“I played bass. I was rhythmically quite suspect”), met Michael Hollingsworth, founder of Video Cabaret, who asked him to write a song for an upcoming play, which he did, which led to the founding of The Government, the premier



Above: Andy singing with The Government, early 1970s. Photo courtesy of A Space.

Left: Video still from *Snow Job*, 2001. Courtesy of Vtape.

art band of its day. He was lead singer and guitarist. It lasted from 1977 to 1982 and “for better or worse,” he says ruefully, “that is probably how people will remember me.”

Perhaps. The Government, with a sound and act reminiscent of the Talking Heads, had some quasi-hits, though of the more or less underground variety (the typically Paterson version of the hit-tune history is that “some of the songs I didn’t like much became unexpectedly popular”).

But perhaps not. The Government may have provided the feverish beat and the smarty-pants lyrics but the scene (a word he prefers over “community”), the scene we’ve come to characterize as Queen Street West, was flowing, flowering, rippling along through the new artist-run centres like A Space, flexing new artistic muscles in video and performance, trying on homo for size and mostly liking the fit, weaving in politics both strongly anti-censorship and deliciously impudent (“ART vs Art”—the Hummer Sisters run for mayor in 1982 against the terminally drab contender Art Eggleton). And Andy Paterson was part of it all. Writer RM Vaughan speaks of how the length and breadth of the Patersonian omnipresence was a mystery to him until he saw the 1998 Power Plant show, *Picturing the Toronto Art Community: The Queen Street Years*, where Andy, he says, seemed to be in every second photograph and there was this cabal of courageous gay men trying to create gay art at a time when thugs were still throwing rocks at gay bars and he couldn’t have done it but Andy did (“But I wasn’t gay then,” snorts Andy when I recount this. “Bent, maybe”), and then Vaughan tells me that he’d dreamt of Andy

recently and in the dream Andy was singing “The Queen of England is a lesbian named Brenda” over and over again, “which is the sort of thing he’d sing.”

Quite possibly—one of Andy’s performance pieces, *Lucky 13*, is a quiz show parody where he asks questions like, “Who said ‘I love looking at naked men on the cross?’” (Madonna, it turns out). In the time I was with him, he demonstrated how the “beep beep bo bu” of a mailing machine he worked generated the rhythmic pattern of one of The Government songs.

Perhaps Andy was not creating gay art back then. Artist Andy Fabo says “he was never gay the way I am. He’s kind of polymorphous perverse. Affectional.” And there is the fact that Andy was briefly married, to photographer Amy Wilson, and had an affair with writer Kathy Acker, but there was also the affair with Nova Scotia writer and performer Jim McSwain and the regular pleasurings, over the last five years or so he says, in the dark spaces at The Cellar, the gay bathhouse in boys town. Queer, then? Quite possibly, as he defines it: “weird, wonderful, a perverse way of looking at the world that goes beyond sexual practice.”

It’s there in the work (and I don’t just mean the blow job scene in his 1999 video, *Cash and Carry*), of which there is much (Fabo thinks, in fact, that it’s about time that someone pulled together a Paterson retrospective), and which would certainly give the lie to any

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notion that Andy was little more than a bohemian bon vivant with a passion for opening night munchies and Sawmill Creek wine.

There are the videotapes (the first dating back to 1981), the performance work (the earliest, *Coffee Break*, debuting in 1980; the most recent, *Lucky 13*, just this year), the publications (everything from a novel, *The Disposables*, to magazine articles, to catalogue essays, to book editing) to the music (scores for many of Video Cabaret’s performances), to curatorial work dating back to the early nineties. He has served on arts juries. He has appeared in other artists’ video work. He has played a significant volunteer

role in organizations like A Space, YYZ Artists' Outlet, and Trinity Square Video. He has appeared nude—an image, Kim Tomczak reports someone having said, “that burns forever onto your retina.”

I remember those years. I was heavily involved in the gay publication *The Body Politic*, and its office was at the corner of Duncan and Adelaide streets for much of that period. It was a time when gift culture was the scene's unofficial ethic and currency, though most of us probably never thought of it that way or would even have recognized the term, one that anthropologists use to describe societies, usually ones with rich and reliable food sources, that assign social importance based not on what individuals hoard but on what they give away. It wasn't money, of course. Few have it now. Fewer had it then.

You gave away your time. You gave away your labour. You gave away what you knew—knowledge and skills that you had that others might not. That still happens, of course—I'm not falling into the nostalgia trap. But if there are any two constants in the descriptions of Andy Paterson I solicited, they are his brains and his generosity of spirit. That unanimity crosses generational lines. Trinity Square Video artistic director Scott Treleaven (at whose recent 30th birthday party Andy Paterson squeezed my ass) says, “I'm amazed at the expanse of his intellect. And of his sense of fun. I remember going to one of his performances, me and my friends, all just graduated from OCAD, and it just floored us. We all stood there in awe. I think he integrates better with young artists—same enthusiasms. He never strikes me as jaded.”

Among the middle aged, we have Andy Fabo saying that Andy Paterson “was there at the birth of artist-run centres, and he continues while a lot of us got burnt out ten years ago.” And Johanna Householder, teacher and multidisciplinary and performance artist, calls him “an engine, a motor in the Duchampian sense of pieces of art being machines for art. He's not just hanging around—he's working, performing, curating, holding up his part of the dialogue. He is a machine for the making of an art community.”

He is not, for all that, an easy man. He says he doesn't suffer fools gladly. That he can be sharp-tongued. His conversational style is so elliptical and allusive that it can exhaust one rather quickly—though friend and performance artist Paul Couillard says that after fifteen years or so he can follow him quite easily.

Perhaps that was my mistake. Always wanting straight answers. Wanting A then B then C. Better just to have followed, down into the alleys, down onto the tarmac, up along the fence, knowing the small, dark spaces beneath cars, knowing the hopeless innocence of windows, knowing there will never be enough night, knowing the world as Andy Paterson knows it. Knowing the world as he's helped make it. ●

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