



Kevin Coates, the Duke of Wellington's Piano Man, shows his versatility. Coates started his weekly gig in 1982 on a dare from his university buddies. PHILIP WALKER, RECORD STAFF

A long, long time ago . . .

Dust off the ivories, slice the American Pie Coates celebrates 25 years at the Duke

BY COLIN HUNTER
RECORD STAFF

WATERLOO

When you're the piano man, you get some requests more than others.

Piano Man, for instance. Kevin Coates can't even guesstimate how many times he has tickled the (plastic) ivories of his keyboard on that one.

"Lots," he says. "Lots." Lots is also the number of gigs Coates has played at the Duke of Wellington since he first wandered in for a pint with some buddies in 1982.

He's willing to bet that at some point during Friday's show — his 25th anniversary gig at the Duke — someone in the crowd will pipe up with Billy Joel's familiar phrase, "sing us a song,

you're the piano man."

He doesn't mind. After all, Piano Man is no American Pie, which he has played lots and lots.

"I've secretly made a vow not to play American Pie for a couple of years," he says.

It's actually a not-so-secret vow now, and one he intends to break on Friday, since it's a special occasion.

There's another tune he's bound to play, whether it gets requested or not: Your Song, by Elton John. If there's one song that best encapsulates Coates' 25 years of playing at the Duke, that's the one.

It was the first song he ever played there when some dorm buddies cajoled him to try a number on the Duke's battered piano.

"It was an old upright piano," re-

calls Coates, now 44. "It was awful. It was usually out of tune and the keys hurt my fingers."

It was Coates' first live performance, if you don't count a handful of shows he played with his high school band, Platum Loy. "The only gig we could get was Grade 8 graduations."

An earlier musical venture, playing Alice Cooper covers on the accordion in his house when he was 10, had somehow failed to attract an audience wider than his parents.

But despite being a rookie — and despite the clunky old piano — Coates felt perfectly at ease onstage, and the crowd seemed to dig it. The bar staff dug it too, and asked him to come back for weekly shows.

"He had so much charisma right away," recalls Duke owner Desi Fatkin, who was just a waitress at the pub back then. "He's still got it, every time."

A lot of things have changed in Coates' life since then — he moved away, became a teacher, got married,

CONCERT

Kevin Coates

■ 25th anniversary show at the Duke of Wellington, 33 Erb St. W., Waterloo 519-886-9370

■ With Carter Lancaster on guitar; Don Featherstone on sax, bass.

■ Friday, 9:30 p.m.

■ www.kevincoates.com

"I've played hundreds of places over the years, and this one is the dearest to me because it was the first — the beginning of a lifetime of music."

He's working on his second solo album now of original material, which he hopes to release by the end of the year.

During the day, Coates teaches English and music at St. David's High School, and occasionally dusts off the accordion to wow his students with a polka version of AC/DC's Back in Black.

Chances are, that one won't be requested tonight.

Just about anything else is fair game, including Piano Man and American Pie.

Coates knows that when you're the piano man and everyone's in the mood for a melody, you've got to get them feeling all right.

"I'll play whatever people want to hear," he says. "If people are listening, I'm having the greatest time ever."

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Only tough Pussycats can sing and barf

Just when I'm about to launch into my usual tirade — which at this point, bores even me — about the "pornification" of pop culture and the way it demeans young women under the guise of "empowerment," the young female contestants on **Pussycat Dolls Present: Search for the Next Doll (7 p.m. and 10 p.m. on MM)** do something completely unexpected: they begin throwing up.

A virus, it seems, has hit the 18 semifinalists in this Machiavellian quest to recruit a sexed-up Stepford doll to crown the musical question, "doncha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?" with the skank-O-rific pop unit.

Instead of thrusting their buttocks in full-length mirrors while a cranky choreographer named Mickey tells them to "Work it! Work it! Work it!" most are at this moment hunched over toilets and trash cans, horking their guts out as cameras zoom in for long, lingering closeups.

"I'm definitely going to perform with my group," insists one, Ewa, writhing in agony before a scheduled audition.

"All I ask is that there's a garbage can off to the side of the stage waiting for me."

The subtext, I must admit, intrigues me, since the entire show, and the group itself, is designed as a musical come-on that — like the air-brushed pages of Playboy — only works if it's perceived as flawless.

Sexpot dancers throwing up in buckets? It kinda destroys the illusion and — gasp — humanizes the performers, which, naturally, sends the show's producers into panic mode.

"Being sick is definitely not an excuse!" Dolls founder Robin Antin, determined to maintain appearances, instructs the would-be burlesque queens shivering under blankets with IVs stuck in their arms.

"If the Pussycat Dolls are sick, they get up there on stage and they perform, so please just do your best and kill it!"

And so they do, staggering into position for slinky dance routines to songs like I Don't Need a Man —

which should be subtitled I Do, However, Need a Doctor — while their bodies quiver as if an electrical current is running down their spines.

"I'm a sexy momma, just trying to get what I wanna!" they croon in what, in the age of Britney and Christina, passes for feisty feminism.

From here it's off to a Vegas strip club to hone their confidence by — how else? — dancing half-naked in a glass box like the hookers in Amsterdam's red-light district.

"One of the ways to understand what confidence is all about is to do something like that!" insists Antin, a former Doll now too gnarled and surgically tightened to make a convincing sex puppet.

"I want to see you refining your vibe!"



JOEL RUBINOFF
TELEVISION

It's a determined effort to reinforce Pussycat protocol fatally undermined — in an ironically empowering way — by the filmmakers desire to exploit their subjects on as many levels as possible.

"I can barely sing!" croaks flu-stricken Chelsea. "I can barely move. It's really hard for me to walk upstairs 'cause my muscles are all sore and aching and I'm very, very weak."

Sure she's a sexy momma, but once you've seen her throw up in a bucket, the fantasy ain't what it used to be.

CHANNEL SURFING

•After last week's embarrassing fiasco that saw visiting luminary Diana Ross croak out a '60s classic without hitting one correct note, the **American Idol (9 p.m. on Fox, CTV)** judging panel should consider extending their snarly critiques to guest coaches who insist on performing.

"I don't care if you had 17 No. 1 singles and wrote the book on American pop!" Simon Cowell could snap with rancour. "That abomination wasn't fit for a cruise ship!"

Ah well, at least we still have Sanjaya — current favourite at votefortheworst.com — and bald-headed Phil.

Tonight's target: the British Invasion, with '60s songbird Lulu (To Sir With Love) and former Hermit Peter Noone (There's a Kind of Hush) reprising 40-year-old hits.

Does anyone have a giant gong handy?

•Cult filmmaker John Waters hosts **Love You to Death (10:30 p.m. on Global)**, an offbeat anthology series about marriages that descend into criminal mayhem.

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Nine women compete to become a member of the Pussycat Dolls (pictured) on Search for the Next Doll (7 p.m. and 10 p.m. on MM).