

# Discovery of live tapes led to a surprise reunion for Montreal synth-pop pioneers

By Brendan Kelly, The Gazette January 9, 2014

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**Tracy Howe, left, and Kevin Komoda will bring Rational Youth to Casa del Popolo on Friday, Jan. 10, for the reactivated band's first Montreal show in 27 years.**

**Photograph by: Courtesy of Rational Youth**

MONTREAL — If Rational Youth is back in business, it's in large part thanks to the fact that Kevin Komoda decided to do some renovations in his Old Montreal condo last year.

Rummaging through some old boxes, Komoda — who was in the influential synth-pop band for much of its run in the '80s — found tapes of two Rational Youth shows from its 1983 Canadian tour, in Ottawa and Winnipeg.

Komoda told Rational Youth frontman Tracy Howe about the discovery, and the two pals immediately decided they should put out the recordings as cassette-only releases via Komoda's indie label, Nachos! Records. The shows had been making the rounds for years in bootleg form.

So Nachos! launched the cassettes in the fall, and then the Toronto-based electro-pop label Artofact Records came into the picture, suggesting they release the shows on CD. The result was the launch in early November of Live 1983, a two-CD set containing the two live albums, and Magic Box, which includes Rational Youth rarities, notably early demos, remixes, and solo recordings by Howe, Komoda and Bill Vorn, who formed the band in 1981 with Howe.

Then came an offer to play in Sweden and Norway. Really! Turns out Rational Youth — maybe Canada's first major electro-pop band, and among the first wave of electro-popsters in the world — had always had a strong underground following in those countries.

On the phone this week from his home just outside Ottawa, Howe told me that he met up with the guys from noted Swedish electronic band Covenant a few years ago, and they told him that growing up in Sweden, they and their friends were into Depeche Mode ... and Rational Youth.

So now they have dates booked in Sweden and Norway for late April and early May. First, though, they are set to play Casa del Popolo Friday night — the band's first show in Montreal in 27 years.

A long hiatus is just about par for the course for a band that includes Howe. Prior to forming Rational Youth, he was the drummer and one of three singers in the Normals, one of the first punk bands in Montreal; they re-formed in late 2011, some 33 years after they last hit the stage.

Howe sounds like he's enjoying the revival of his old bands, though he really makes it sound like the Rational Youth comeback came about almost as a complete accident.

And it's been a challenge.

"Learning the songs is quite difficult, because we're not playing fast and loose with them," said Howe.

He also has more mixed feelings about the original Rational Youth experience than he does about the old days in the Normals. The Normals went their separate ways after less than a year together. They never recorded an album back in the day — though they recently released an album of newly recorded versions of their old tunes — so that initial run was simply a series of mythic early punk shows.

Rational Youth was a bumpier ride.

After the Normals split up, Howe formed Heaven Seventeen, a punkish band with synths. One of the band's keyboard players was Ivan Doroschuk, who soon after formed Men Without Hats. In fact, Howe did a brief stint as a guitarist in the Hats.

Rational Youth was born in 1981 when Vorn, whom Howe calls "a tech genius," walked into Sam the Record Man, where Howe was working at the time, and said they should form a band. He knew Howe from Heaven Seventeen and they quickly realized they had similar interests, including an obsession with seminal German electronic band Kraftwerk.

"He had synthesizers that no one else had," said Howe. "The real hook was that we were so technological."

He describes walking into Vorn's Ontario St. E. apartment and seeing a stunning array of electronic keyboards and sequencers.

Shortly after the launch of Rational Youth's first album, *Cold War Night Life*, Vorn quit to go back to university. (He's now a professor of electronic arts at Concordia and creates installation and performance projects.) That's when the band expanded to include Komoda on keyboards, Denis Duran on bass and Angel Calvo on drums.

They were signed to Capitol Records, but Howe says the label thought they had a new-wave hair band, while Howe looked at Rational Youth as a pioneering electro formation. There were some pretty well-known songs — Saturdays in Silesia, In Your Eyes, Dancing on the Berlin Wall — but the group never managed to gain the same profile of that other Montreal electro-pop band from the same era, Men Without Hats.

"People know the songs more than they know the actual band," said Howe.

The lineup for Friday's show will feature Howe and Komoda on keyboards and vocals, Brian Arsenault on synths, Paul Grainville on drums, Scott Cameron (also from the Normals) on bass and Gaenor Howe, Tracy's wife, on electronic percussion and backing vocals.

"It's a freakin' synth onslaught," said Howe. "When it's tight, it sounds epic. It's massive."

Howe isn't sure where it all goes from here. There are the dates in Europe in the spring, and it looks like they'll be opening for their old pals Men Without Hats on a summer tour of North America.

***Rational Youth performs Friday, Jan. 10 at 8:30 p.m. at Casa del Popolo, 4873 St-Laurent Blvd., with the Tibaldos. Tickets cost \$13, available at [casadelpopolo.com](http://casadelpopolo.com).***

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