

The Crash of The Jefferson Airplane

WHATEVER HAPPENED to good ol' rock 'n' roll? Eddie Cochran, Buddy Holly, and the Big Bopper died. Elvis Presley lost it at the movies. Chuck Berry holed up in Missouri—where he ain't about to show anybody anything. Little Richard got religion, then ungot it, but just can't stop shuckin' and jivin'. Jerry Lee Lewis was last seen goin' up the country. And that, more or less, was the Fifties.

Then last decade, the Beatles, like Eve, bit into an Apple—and they've been looking to get back to that primal paradise ever since (dig Ringo's nice-try, "Octopus's Garden," on *Abbey Road*). The Rolling Stones started gathering moss, as Brian (Jones) joined Brian (Epstein) in Avalon. Bob Dylan stepped in a country pie. The Doors closed. Cream curdled. Traffic stalled. Big Brother and the Holding Company went bankrupt—you might say the result of passing a bad chick. And that, less or more, was the Sixties.

The immediate inspiration for this sackcloth-and-ashes lamentation is a reading of Ralph J. Gleason's pseudo-book, *The Jefferson Airplane and the San Francisco Sound*, coupled with the recent release of the Jefferson Airplane's latest album, *Volunteers*.

You all know the rock 'n' ritual: born of the virgin Fifties, suffered under Chubby Checker, crucified by surfing, dead in Philadelphia, and buried by the folkies; on the third year of the Sixties, it rose again and ascended unto pop music heaven, where it sitteth on the left hand of the generation gap, from whence it shall come to judge the politicians and the over-30's. In actuality, of course, rock in the Year of our Lord 1970 is just as dazed and confused as ever—yearning for the simple, scared, and snide Fifties; groveling in the dirt around America's c&w roots; beating itself black-and-blues with distorted 12-bar structures. And yet the music itself is doing quite nicely.

What's most in trouble is the so-long-supposed "revolutionary spirit" of rock—that schizophrenic dream of wishful thinking and self-hype. Enter Ralph J. Gleason, San Francisco jazz critic and

rock apologist. In his newspaper and magazine columns and in his book (75 per cent of which consists of transcripts of interviews with the Airplane and others), Gleason touts rock music as the panacea of all ills, the converter of souls and the secret revolutionary slowly making the world safe for the youth movement.

C'mon, Ralph—and you too, kids—grow up. Take a closer look at the Establishment. See, it's made of rubber—it co-opts by expanding, by stretching a little bit further and absorbing all the freaky excesses and aberrations. Acceptance, that's the real disarmament. The media canonize hippiedom, and soon Broadway's *Hair* offers the flesh rather than the spirit. One of these days grass will be legal, and then what? Big Brother moves over just enough; and as soon as he gets a piece of the action, the Angry Young Man settles for a lip-service revolution full of sound and fury and signifying nothing.

Consider the Jefferson Airplane, the San Francisco group with the broadest popular appeal, long considered symbolic of the revolutionary aspects of the youth movement. In the popular mentality the Airplane, even more than the Grateful Dead, became equated with San Francisco: benefit performances and free outdoor concerts; freaky people lighting up and dancing freely, in complete control of their lives; "Jefferson Airplane Loves You" and "Feed Your Head." The group's magical name spread the San Francisco mystique far and wide; Britisher Donovan even wrote "Fat Angel" in their honor—"Fly Jefferson Airplane, gets you there on time."

IT ALL BEGAN inauspiciously in 1965, when artist-folksinger Marty Balin decided to start a musicians' nightclub and form a rock band to play there. By late summer he had taken control of the Matrix, a small bar on Fillmore Street, and had brought together the original Jefferson Airplane (with slightly different people and with a name from a shortened joke blues monicker, "Blind Thomas Jefferson Airplane"). The group scuffled around for the next year or so,

just a part of the evolving San Francisco scene. Then RCA Victor, a record company which was then (as now) sorely in need of rock talent, signed the Airplane—for a \$20,000 advance that marked the beginning of up-front money for young rock groups.

By 1967, the roster of individuals in the group had stabilized to what it is today: Marty Balin and Grace Slick, vocals; Paul Kantner, guitar and some vocals; Jorma Kaukonen, lead guitar; Jack Casady, bass; and Spencer Dryden, drums—good musicians all (Kaukonen and Casady actually among the greatest in all of rock), with three or four strong songwriter-vocalists as well. Not only that, but through time each Airplane crewmember has proven personable, articulate and outspoken.

But aside from the Airplane's many talents, the band also had a few breaks, such as their one-album headstart on the other Bay Area bands by the time of the Monterey Pop Festival—and their friend (later manager) Bill Thompson's well-timed publicity gimmicks: buttons and stickers reading "Jefferson Airplane Loves You." (Originally the verb was to have been "tongues," but more cautious heads prevailed.) Soon the two songs Grace brought with her from the collapse of the Great Society—"Somebody to Love" and "White Rabbit"—soared high on the pop charts, as did the band's studio-tight second album, *Surrealistic Pillow*. "Feed Your Head" became the national refrain, and the Airplane began to tour for big money.

By the end of 1967, the Airplane had made it in magazines and on national television and through several grueling months of work on album number three, the tense, peculiar, stylistically innovative *After Bathing at Baxter's*. (RCA's fears overruled the suggested title, *Good Shit*.) In addition, the group cut some brief commercials for Levi Strauss; not only was this a dubious activity for a supposedly non-capitalistic, free-spirit band, but the ads were horrendous to boot.

Early in 1968, the Airplane split from their second manager, Bill Graham; the parting was a relatively amicable

by Ed Leimbacher



one. The group also demanded from RCA—and to some extent obtained—greater control of album production and subsequent promotion; they agitated too for quality recording studios in San Francisco.

The Airplane's successes that year were spectacular: a fall tour of England and Holland with the Doors, a gold LP for *Surrealistic Pillow*, the cover slot in Life's rock music issue, a film with Elbridge Cleaver for Jean-Luc Godard, and a best-selling fourth release. That album, *Crown of Creation*, seemed more a holding action than an advance, but its gall-and-wormwood bitterness accurately reflected the changing mood of America's radical young.

Equally symbolic was the Airplane's second appearance on the *Smothers Brothers Show*: Grace wore blackface and gave the clenched fist salute. Later she said it was a way of evening up the show's skin-color scheme. She also commented, "A bored socialite can do the same thing."

Through October at least, 1969 was another year of uppers and downers for the Airplane. Marijuana busts in the South and Hawaii; more arguments with RCA over the language of some

lyrics; Grace in the hospital for a second operation for throat nodes. But Kaukonen and Casady were also jamming here, there and everywhere, and continuing to amaze the music world with their instrumental brilliance. And late in the summer there was Woodstock (but what's so good about feelin' bad?) and an appearance on the *Dick Cavett Show*. During the latter, the Airplane managed to slip the word "motherfucker" out over the air waves—yes, Mr. and Mrs. America, you heard it first from the Jefferson Airplane.

The real news, however, was *Bless Its Pointed Little Head*, the group's fifth LP and first "live" album—a great success all around, filled with power and humor and surprise. Its impact seems particularly ferocious when compared to that of other live releases by San Francisco groups, such as Big Brother's *Cheap Thrills* and the Dead's *Anthem of the Sun*.

And that was where the Jefferson Airplane had gotten to when album number six, *Volunteers*, appeared late in October. The group was four years young; the people older, wiser and a bit richer; their music stronger than ever. Right up there with the Beatles, the group represented the best and the worst of rock.

Put their adventurous music—jazz-improvisational jamming from Kaukonen, Casady and Dryden, plus strange lyrics and dynamic singing from the others—over against their abortive ads for white Levis. Set the inroads they've managed to make against a commercial record company for creative control of their own thing alongside the recently revealed skeleton-in-the-closet that Paul Kantner borrows many of his lyrics from other writers without giving them credit (among them, A. A. Milne, John Wyndham and—a nice irony—Ralph J. Gleason). Compare the Airplane's much-vaunted revolutionary spirit with the not-so-harsh realities: trumped-up pot busts, Grace giving the power-to-the-people salute, Marty swearing sweetly on *Dick Cavett*.

THAT, YOU SEE, is where it's at for the Airplane. Theatricality. Harmless words and grand gestures rather than truly radical actions. As though the Establishment, like RCA Victor, can't manage to swallow a bit of *impolitesse* without blinking. Seen in this light, Grace's remark is right on: a bored socialite *can* do the same thing.

So Gleason's objects of veneration are



a trifle hollow. Aside from perhaps the Byrds, no other American rock group has recorded a more impressive corpus of music; but the Airplane's revolutionary sword is looking a bit rusty. Yet *Volunteers*—on first hearing at least—seems to have attained that fine-honed radical edge.

In terms of sheer music, *Volunteers* is the greatest Airplane album yet; they may have taken off four years ago, but they didn't reach the stratosphere till now. Not only has the group produced ten of its strongest numbers ever, but there's a bit of frosting on the cake from guest instrumentalists like Steve Stills (of Crosby, Stills, Nash, Young, and whoever else they may have added lately) and Jerry Garcia of the Dead.

But *Volunteers* also seems designed

specifically to freak out all right-wingers—the kind of cretins, that is, who think in terms of “Communist-dope-fiend-hippie-pervert-Jews.” The album cover sports “photos” from a send-up of Woodstock called the Paz (South Dakota) Chin-In (*paz*, of course, means peace in Spanish)—together with U.S. flags and marijuana plants. The record grooves are even more provocative.

On the one hand, there's simplicity and excellent guitar work in Kaukonen's gospel tune, “Good Shepherd,” and a cynical, inside-the-music-industry group-sing called “A Song for All Seasons.” But, in addition, Grace offers a one-minute version of the Russian tune, “Meadowlands”; and Paul Kantner leads the way through “Wooden Ships,” an after-the-war chiller which he wrote

with Steve Stills and David Crosby. Most interesting of all are two blatantly revolutionary calls-to-action and a third song which passes beyond that to an entirely different political philosophy.

“We Can Be Together” opens the album with a rousing tune and a street-level lyric from the “outlaws” of America:

*Up against the wall
Up against the wall, motherfucker
Tear down the walls
Tear down the walls . . .*

By the end of the album—in the Balin-Kantner title tune—the outlaws have indeed gotten it together, and have become “volunteers” out in the streets:

*Hey now it's time for you and me
Got a revolution Got to revolution
Come on now we're marching to the sea
Got a revolution Got to revolution
Who will take it from you
We will and who are we
We are volunteers . . .*

Lyrics guaranteed to prick the RCA ulcers, earn the opprobrium of the elders of our tribe, and win hearty applause from the Airplane's peers. Ah, but it's just another gesture—and the group knows it. Are the youth of America about to rise up en masse and storm the barricades singing “Volunteers”?

Grace Slick provides the answer in “Eskimo Blue Day.” Her vocalizing in “Hey Frederick” goes through heart-catching changes, but here she's cold, harsh, and truthful:

*Consider how small you are
Compared to your scream
The human dream
Doesn't mean shit to a tree.*

But nihilism has never been a popular philosophy. The radicals, with their vision of means to an end, will simply ignore “Eskimo Blue Day”—just as America-at-large will ignore the Airplane's latest revolutionary album.

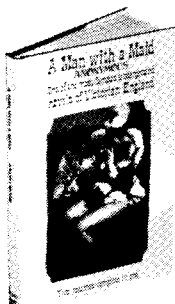
Not that it won't sell. If things are just, *Volunteers* will go on selling forever—it's that good, that important to rock. But its political effect can only be slight. Ineffectual revolution, that's what's happening. The Airplane may sing, “Up against the wall, motherfucker,” but the printed lyric sheet just reads, “Up against the wall fred.”

Whatever happened to good ol' rock 'n' roll? It grew up and got concerned, and then pretentious, and then weary and cynical. And that, more or less, is today.

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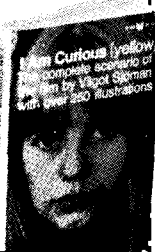
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“We’re obsessed with near sighted disputes based on race, ideology and so on.... We call for 4000 united convicts.... Don’t let the pigs harass you into a bad move. . . . Let’s get it together for a while.”
—*from the San Quentin Outlaw, suppressed by the prison Warden*

Using Racism at San Quentin

“I’ve been accused of being a simple man, and I think that’s true. I believe in a system of reward and punishment. This is no Boy Scout camp.”

—Louis S. Nelson, Warden of
California’s San Quentin prison

WHAT HAD BEGUN as a protest by Black Muslims against San Quentin’s prison conditions quickly veered out of control and developed into full-scale racial warfare. By mid-January, there had been sporadic outbreaks of violence, and two convicts, both white, had been stabbed to death by unknown assailants. Two days later, the whole prison was engulfed in chaos.

The biting smell of tear gas hung heavy in the air as small bands of inmates raged through the yards, breaking windows and pausing to attack stragglers of the opposite race. A series of fires erupted in the cellblocks, belching angry black smoke over the prison’s 400 acres. By late afternoon, more than half of San Quentin’s 4000 prisoners had converged on the main exercise yard. Armed with pipes, wooden clubs, daggers fashioned from scissor halves, forks twisted into brass knuckles and other bizarre weapons, they massed for a final showdown. 1500 whites, a few of them with hand-made iron crosses around their necks and clumsy swastikas tattooed on their arms, formed at one end of the yard; 1000 blacks stood at the other. As if acting out a ritual, they began to advance, throwing rocks and bricks, and protecting themselves with shields made from mess-hall trays.

There was less than 50 feet of daylight between the front ranks when the prison guards and police brought in from outlying cities finally began to act, laying down what one observer later called “a wall of fire” with shotguns and rifles. Although weapons were supposedly aimed at the ground, several convicts crumpled, hit either directly or by ricocheting slugs. Shouting and cursing at the guards and each other, the two armies hesitated for a moment, then broke and ran.

The January, 1967 riot was one of the most serious dis-

turbances in San Quentin’s 115-year history. One prison official later admitted that it was “a miracle” that only two men were killed. Countless more were injured, 18 of them seriously enough to require hospitalization. It took several hours after the convicts had finally been herded back to lock-up to collect the more than 1500 pounds of homemade weapons that lay scattered over the battlefield, and it was several days before the prison regimen returned to normal.

The local newspaper called it “a con war,” placing the story on the front page for a day and then letting it die. An aide from Governor Ronald Reagan’s office appeared on the scene at the height of the violence, looked around, and then left for Sacramento, assuring reporters, “People here at San Quentin know their job. They acted decisively.”

There were no investigations, no commissions appointed. The riot was business as usual at San Quentin, the sort of behavior the public has been taught to expect from convicts, the sort of behavior that supposedly justifies their presence in prison. As soon as order was re-established, this latest skirmish in the continuing prison race war was forgotten—by everyone except the convicts. They surveyed the ashes at San Quentin and knew that the bloodbath would be re-enacted again and again unless something changed. No one else cared, so they decided to make the changes themselves.

THE TREMORS THAT have shaken society-at-large during the ’60s have only gradually, and in waves of diminished strength, reached places like San Quentin. But they have made themselves felt, creating a situation favorable to change among the inmate population. The “old” convict was poorly educated and largely unaware of what was taking place outside prison walls. He internalized society’s view of him as human refuse and frequently spent his prison years in self-annihilating behavior. If he clashed with the administration, it was either through acts provoked by inarticulate, bottled-up rage, or through the collective hysteria of the race riot. In recent years, however, there has been an influx of prisoners who are of a new mold. The “new”

by Robert Minton and Stephen Rice

Illustrations by Stephen Osborn

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