

sly and the family stone

Sly Stone was very cool. Shirtless, vested, the languorous look, one eye cocked, mouth half-open as if caught laughing at his own joke. Freddie, Rosie, Gregg, Larry, Cynthia and Jerry were the Family, and we were the children.

The bikers, the stoners, a butcher, a banker, the long-haired hippies and the Afro-ed blacks, we were all Everyday People. Sly Stone alone created that mix. And when he raised two long fingers skyward at Woodstock, we went wherever he wanted to take us — literally, spiritually, eventually.

Sly & The Family Stone's music was immensely liberating. A tight, riotous funk, it was precisely A Whole New Thing. And they were a beautiful sight: rock's first integrated band, black, white, women, men. Hair, skin. Fringe and sweat. Extraordinary vibes for extraordinary times.

The beginning was hopeful — “Underdog,” they sang in 1967. But for the rest of the decade the mood was uniquely up: “Dance to the Music,” the single and album, offered unprecedented energy and optimism. Hits like “Everyday People,” “Stand!” and “Hot Fun in the Summertime” were soulful. Positive. Ambitious. Tolerant. “Diff'rent strokes for diff'rent folks” was Sly's true philosophy. And they rocked like nothing else.

Sly, ex-San Francisco DJ, early psychedelic rock & roll producer, was the great communicator. He drew us in *deep*. The mass eruption that followed demanded Sly take the helm as the Great Black Hero — Otis gone, Hendrix too out, Motown passé. But he had roots in African-American traditions: as youngsters Sly, brother Freddie and sister Rose sang with Big Mama Stewart in a Vallejo Baptist church. Playing God was too much. So Sly took the torch, toyed with it and let it crash around him.

“Sly was born in Texas country,” says an old family friend. “He feared stardom. Having that kind of power over an audience scared him. He wasn't raised to be like that. Made his own bed. Was well educated. Wanted a

family. But he loved the limousines and the helpers.”

Sly spent days without sleep. Concerts were an inconvenience. Journalist Roy Carr witnessed one tour:

“Sly was locked in a hotel room to insure making the gig, but come show time he wasn't there. Someone in the entourage confessed to seeing him leave through the back door with passport in hand. After a mad rush to the airport we found Sly at customs. ‘I'm off to Amsterdam to go shopping,’ he says. ‘Tell the audience to wait.’”

Sly showed his scars with the torturous 1971 album, *There's a Riot Goin' On*. Gritty and sarcastic, it sounded like a record at the wrong speed. And still he drew blood. “Sly created a moment of lucidity in the midst of all the obvious negatives and the false, faked hopes,” wrote Greil Marcus in his book *Mystery Train*.

It was Sly & the Family Stone's only Number One album.

By the mid-Seventies, though, Sly and remnants of the Family Stone ground to a halt. The *Fresh* album, showed some spark. In 1979, Sly left Epic Records. A new kick-start at Warner Brothers never really took shape.

Despite the troubles, Sly never lost his supporters. He resurfaced with George Clinton's P-Funk All-Stars in the early Eighties. Earth, Wind & Fire paid homage on their 1990 release, *Heritage*. Whatever comes next will be worth watching.

It is mighty clear that Sly & the Family Stone made it possible for black popular music to burst free. *On its own terms*. Listen to the voices: Marvin Gaye and a revitalized Motown. Curtis Mayfield. George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic. Miles Davis. Santana. The Isley Brothers (Part 2). James Brown (Parts 2 and 3). And the echoes: Prince, Arrested Development, the Family Stand, the edginess and hope of rap's front line.

No one is really untouched by the music of Sly & the Family Stone. Tonight is the payback. All the squares go home.

- HARRY WEINGER





california sound

It's the pot of gold at the end of Route 66; home to the cutest girls in the world; the place you'd rather be when all the leaves are brown and the ski is gray; where it never rains and a certain hotel always has room for the pretty, pretty people. It's where you come when you're going right back where you started from.

It, of course, is California, that mythic state of mind, where life is sweet along palmy streets paved with broken dreams. It's where the world runs out, merging with surf and sun and sky into a fanciful paradise of winsome charm and wishful thinking. From the desert to the sea to orange groves rolled flat by freeways, it's California now and forever. . . amen.

Notwithstanding Paris when it sizzles or autumn in New York, California is maybe the most celebrated locale in the history of popular music. Banjo-pluckers sang her praises on their way to gold fields and heartbreak. Oakies ached for her citrus-scented bounty, and every surfer worth his salt can sing a salute to her gnarly tubes.

For big band warbler Irving Kaufman, "California and You" was all he needed to put together his first hit in the freezing Gotham winter of 1914. Ten years later "California Here I Come," first heard in a Broadway musical called *Bombo*, reaped gold for, respectively, Al Jolson, George Price and California Ramblers. In 1931, Red Nichols & His Five Pennies cashed in with "California Medley."

But it's more recently that California — the dream, the reality and the shimmering mirage between the two — has come into musical maturity. Since the dawn of rock & roll, dozens of tunes touting California's elusive essence have made the charts. Among the many: Leslie Gore's "California Nights," the Rivas' "California Sun," "California Dreamin'" by the Mama's & the Papa's and "California Soul" by the 5th Dimension.

The list goes on (who can forget "California," Debbie Boone's plaintive 1978 follow-up to "You Light Up My Life?"), but California's place in rock reaches far beyond a litany of Golden State come-ons. It's a place that has nurtured

more significant innovations in music than anywhere in the world. More than simply a destination for dreams, California is home for a dazzling variety of indigenous sounds, echoed and enhanced by the legendary locale itself.

Where else, for example, could Brian Wilson have found inspiration for what remains the single most potent evocation of all things Californian? For the rest of the world, the Beach Boys *are* California, in all its eternal youth and halcyon hedonism. There is simply no body of work as closely associated with its point of origin as the sound and substance of these 1988 Hall of Fame inductees. The Beach Boys' sonic simulation of surfing may have initially ridden the crest of a craze, but early Sixties hits like "Surfin," "Surfin' Safari," "Surfin' USA" and "Surfer Girl" (complete with a West Coast geography lesson from "Huntington to Malibu") have endured as anthems to that most alluring element of the California lifestyle — the promise of a free ride.

The same might be said for their drag strip dramas and high school confidentials. But such is the group's identity as a Southern California zeitgeist that is virtually impossible to imagine "Rhonda" or "Barbara Ann" residing anywhere else. If not always "Good Vibrations," then certainly "Fun, Fun, Fun," could well be California's official motto. It's a connection that sparked again in the hit flick *Shampoo* when "Wouldn't It Be Nice" became the ironic lament of Beverly Hills' bored and beautiful.

The Beach Boys, Jan & Dean and a dozen supersonic surf bands fashioned a universally recognized California Sound out of high harmonies and Strats. But the state has hosted such a wide variety of musical evolutions and revolutions that the lines quickly begin to blur: what began there was soon everywhere. For much of the best music of the rock & roll era, it really *did* happen in California first.

The prime example, of course, is the sublime and surreal epidemic of innovation known as the San Francisco Sound. While lumping together such as absurd profusion of music under a single rubric may be an audacious conceit, this much

from top left: buffalo springfield; quicksilver messenger service; the byrds

is known: the outbreak was largely confined to the San Francisco Bay Area in the mid-Sixties, it was no respecter of race, creed or color, and no one has ever been the same since.

What's striking, at this distance from California's psychedelic epicenter, is the music's commercial impact. Of San Francisco's pantheon of pioneering early bands — the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Quicksilver Messenger Service, Big Brother & the Holding Company — most went on to achieve genuine mainstream success. It was, of course, another example of California trend-setting, but more to the point, the San Francisco Sound was another heady whiff of the creative audacity that had always hung over the western edge.

The transcendental folk tales of California's native's the Grateful Dead, heard on such essential albums as 1970's *Workingman's Dead* and *American Beauty*, evoked imagery of an Acadian California. The "Dire Wolf" prowled the pine forests of the High Sierras; "A Friend of the Devil" was on the lam in the high desert.

But it was the ringing, echo-drenched early hits of Jefferson Airplane that best represented California to the rest of the awakening world. 1967's "Somebody to Love" remains a cornerstone of psychedelia's contribution to pop mainstream. The acoustic strumming, the silver dagger sentiments, Grace Slick's slashing vocals backed by Marty Balin's polished harmony — the song neatly summed up the intense fusion of folk and rock that had been underway in California for years.

As for the rest of the motley Sixties crew rocking Babylon By the Bay, the mind boggles. After all, wasn't that the point? The San Francisco Sound was *about* being different, from

everyone else, ever. Tom Donahue's eclectic Autumn Records roster neatly captured the time and place, thanks largely to Autumn's A&R chief, and this year's Hall of Fame inductee, Sly Stone. The label waxed a dazzling array of native talent, from faux-Edwardians the Beau Brummels to the Mojo Men, whose lilting "Sit Down I Think I Love You" is a sparkling example of the sheen the California sound lent to the most

disposable pop ditties.

According to the wag, there is no "there" in Oakland, yet San Francisco's East Bay has forged a modest yet significant musical presence with some key California artists. The boogie of El Cerrito's own Creedence Clear-water Revival rightly belongs to fans from Lodi to the bayou, thanks to nine consecutive Top 10 singles. But sounds more representative of San Francisco's down-home sister can be found in the East Bay Grease of Tower of Power and the dazzling diversity of Sly & The Family Stone. The clan's canny funk-rock



the beach boys

concoctions, most conspicuously 1968's "Dance to the Music" and "Everyday People," pointed to the mix-and-match cultural mélange for which California was becoming renowned. Different strokes for different folks, indeed ... and Sly knows most all of them.

Down South, Los Angeles had long since established itself as a pop music mecca, a hit-making factory the equal of any. From Johnny Otis to Terry Melcher, Lou Adler to Peter Asher, Jerry Leiber to Mike Stoller, the best behind-the-boards talent in the business did their best work in the city's studio hive.

L. A.-based Specialty Records boasted a distinctive West

Coast R&B sound with artists the likes of Little Richard, Larry Williams, Lloyd Price and others. Producer and talent scout extraordinaire Johnny Otis was the spark plug for dozens of homegrown hits. Among Otis' most enduring discoveries: California native and Hall of Fame inductee Etta James, who recorded for the Bihari brothers' Mo-dern Records, another L.A. enterprise.

While flowers in the hair were *de rigueur* for San Francisco, something more ominous was sprouting to the south, where the Beach Boys' balmy reveries had given way to smog-and-neon passion plays, with soundtrack courtesy of the Doors. On the 1967's break-on-through debut album the group posited a wholly different California landscape — one, in its vividness, as complete and compelling as surf music or psychedelic soul. Their rapacious visions of an urban wasteland shot through with lurid transcendence, served as a road map to California's soft and seamy underbelly. There were some spooky characters out there in the charred hills beyond Tinsel Town, and The Door's moody grandeur lit more than one weird goldmine scene. This, too, was California ... a place where madness lurked in the shadows of a Hollywood bungalow.

It was an echo heard in the melancholy ballads of Love, Arthur Lee's quintessential Lotus Land dandies, whose languid laments expressed the detached cool of an L.A. in love with its own wan reflection. The Byrds, on the other hand, defined their California-ness in Right Stuff rock & roll, all Jet Age symmetry and supercharged twelve strings, like some-

thing out of Travis AFB, flying eight miles high over Hollywood. The California Sound would continue its prismatic refractions of time and place, chasing down a dozen variants on the theme of charmed living — from the soul of Boz Scaggs to the simmering barrio rhythms of Santana, War, Malo and other exemplars of Chicano cool, to the hard rock candy of Van Halen, the state has room for it all.

But it's the freewheeling, fringe-jacketed singer-songwriter who has emerged as the state's most identifiable musical standard bearer. The earliest incarnation of the sensitive troubadour can be traced to such second generation folk-rockers as Buffalo Springfield, an uneasy alliance of soloists where the song was the thing. The group's first hit, "For What It's Worth," was a chronicle of the Sunset Strip riots, and they would incubate a number of variations on the theme, including the bucolic reveries of Crosby, Stills & Nash and Neil Young's ranch-style rock & roll.

Founded in Los Angeles in 1971, the band's ten-year run yielded five Number One singles, including such paeans to fast-lane living as "Hotel California" and "New Kid in Town." Here, California was the stage setting for cryptic cautionary tales that found innocent country boys and brazen city girls locked in a hot, star-crossed embrace ... small wonder earnest songsmiths flocked to Los Angeles in the band's wake, all in search of that elusive Tequila Sunrise. What a way to go.

California has, finally, always been that kind of place: wide open to the widest-eyed naif, consort to the dream weavers, Our Lady of Perpetual Indulgence. No wonder no place has ever sounded quite the same.

-DAVIN SEAY



the grateful dead, 1969