

THE ANIMALS

If the Stones were the bohemian bad boys of the British R&B scene, the Animals were its working-class heroes.

From the somber opening chords of the Animals' first big hit, "House of the Rising Sun," the world could tell that this band was up to something different than their British Invasion peers. When the record hit #1 in England and America in the summer and fall of 1964, the Beatles and their Mersey-beat fellow travellers dominated the charts with songs like "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and "Glad All Over." "House of the Rising Sun," a traditional folk song then recently recorded by Bob Dylan on his debut album, was a tale of the hard life of prostitution, poverty and despair in New Orleans. In the Animals' recording it became a full-scale rock & roll drama, scored by keyboardist Alan Price's rumbling organ playing and narrated by Eric Burdon's vocals, which, as on many of the Animals' best records, built from a foreboding bluesy lament to a frenetic howl of pain and protest.

The original Animals — Eric Burdon on vocals, Chas Chandler on bass, Alan Price on keyboards, John Steel on drums and Hilton Valentine on guitar — formed in 1962 in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, an industrial city in the northeast of England. Nineteen sixty-four found the group in London, where they became part of a budding R&B/blues scene, which included the Rolling Stones and the Yardbirds, among others. Their first single, "Baby, Let Me Take You Home," produced by Mickie Most, who would produce their records through the end of 1965, was also an electrified version of an old folk-blues previously recorded by Dylan. Their next release, "House of the Rising Sun," catapulted them to British Invasion fame, and was followed over the next two years by a series of classic R&B-based rock records, including "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood," "We Gotta Get Out of This Place," "It's My Life," and "Don't Bring Me Down".

The Animals' music, like that of their fellow British R&B revivalists, was steeped in the sounds of the American black music they loved, which included everything from John Lee Hooker and Leadbelly to Ray Charles and Bo Diddley. Burdon's deep, raspy vocals, which powered so many of the Animals' excellent R&B and blues covers as well as the Brill Building songs the band recorded, also sounded more authentically black

than many of his English R&B contemporaries. The Animals' best records had such great resonance because Burdon drew not only on his enthusiasm, respect and empathy for the blues and the people who created it, but also on his own English working class sensibilities.

If the Stones were the decadent, bohemian bad boys of the British R&B scene, the Animals were its working-class heroes. "We Gotta Get Out of This Place" and "It's My Life," two Brill Building-penned hits for the band, were informed as much by working-class anger as by Burdon's blues influences, and the bands anthemic background vocals underscored the point.

During the two-year period that the original Animals recorded together, their electrified reworkings of folk songs undoubtedly influenced the rise of folk-rock, and Burdon's gritty vocals inspired a crop of British and American blue-eyed soul performers. The band's sound, defined as much by Price's organ playing, which ranged from a stately, neo-classical touch to a soulful wail, as by Burdon's growling vocals, not only was the sound that launched a thousand garage bands but also found a later echo in the Doors' organ-dominated rock dramas. One of the original Animals' last singles, "Inside Looking Out," another folk-blues reworking by the band, was primordial punk, five to ten years too soon, a cross between a Yardbirds-style rave-up and a prison riot.

The original Animals, sans Price who had quit in the spring of '65, split up in mid-1966. Chandler would later discover and co-manage Jimi Hendrix. Burdon carried on for the next two and a half years with several new groupings of Animals, though he replaced the original band's R&B-derived rock with West Coast-style psychedelia.

When performed in concert or on records in the seventies and eighties by Rock's next generation of angry young men, including Bruce Springsteen, Elvis Costello, David Johansen and Tom Petty, the songs the Animals originally recorded or popularized retained their power, soulfulness and intensity. As Eric Burdon explained in his autobiography of his years as an Animal, the band had wanted to represent in their music "total freedom, a little bit of anarchy, a lot of wildness and a lot of good times."

—John Corcoran



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