



The original Byrds:
*Clockwise from top left,
Roger (néé Jim) McGuinn,
Gene Clark, Chris Hill-
man, Michael Clarke, and
David Crosby.*

The Byrds

BY BUD SCOPPA

“IT WAS DYLAN MEETS THE BEATLES.”

That's Roger McGuinn's succinct explanation of the Byrds' bold, brainy take on rock & roll. True enough: What the Byrds pulled off with 1965's landmark *Mr. Tambourine Man* was a resonant synthesis of the Beatles' charged pro forma precision and Dylan's mythopoeic incantations. It turned out to be a startlingly perfect fit, inspiring much that has followed, from their mentors' subsequent *Rubber Soul* and *Blonde On Blonde* to the work of such disparate inheritors as Tom Petty, R.E.M., U2, and Crowded House.

Mr. Tambourine Man was the first rock & roll album with a message, the first made up entirely of anthems, the first to render sound and meaning inseparable. Byrds music was such a departure that it got its own name—"folk-rock"—making the Byrds the first hybrid band. The jaggedly beautiful sound of their 12-string electric guitars was said to have a "jingle jangle," after the line in the Dylan-penned title song. But what it *felt* like was cathedrals doing the Watusi.

They sounded that way because they didn't know any better; there was only one bona-fide rocker in the band. Jim McGuinn, a former Chicago folkie, had worked for the Lime-lighters, Bobby Darin, Chad Mitchell and Judy Collins before moving to L.A. to eke out a living as a coffeehouse solo performer, daringly plunking Beatles tunes on an acoustic in front of skeptical folk purists. Inspired by George Harrison in *A Hard Day's Night*, McGuinn decided to liven up his act by switching to a 12-string Rickenbacker electric (George's axe of choice in the movie) and forming a Beatles-style rock group.

A singer/songwriter from Missouri named Gene Clark signed on, fresh from a stint with the New Christy Minstrels and equally hooked on the Beatles; so did David Crosby, a California-bred folkie, ace harmony singer and one-time member of Les Baxter's Balladeers. San Diego-born Chris Hillman applied his bluegrass mandolin chops to the electric bass, while Michael Clarke's surfer looks made him the obvious choice to play the Dennis Wilson role in this idiosyncratic combo. They plugged in, they played, they made it up as they went along. And it was good.

Once the Byrds had their act together, co-manager/Sven-gali Jim Dickson convinced them to run a Dylan song through their snappy new circuitry. The song was "Mr. Tambourine Man," and it was the final piece of the puzzle. What a concept: rock & roll that *meant* something. And yet, for all its emphasis on content, this music was ultimately about *sound*. As McGuinn explained, with characteristic wryness, in the liner notes to *Mr. Tambourine Man*: "[T]he sound of the airplane in the Forties was a rrrrrroooooaaahhhh sound and Sinatra and other people sang like that, with those sort of overtones. Now we've got the krrrrriiisshhhhhh jet sound, and the kids are singing up in there now. It's the mechanical sounds of the era."

On first hearing, the dynamic density of "I'll Feel A Whole Lot Better," with its 12-string symphony and buoyant

group vocals, sounded both totally fresh and strangely inevitable, as did the shimmering Bo Diddley groove of "Don't Doubt Yourself, Babe" and the eerie atmospheric of "Here Without You." But the linchpin of the album was its triumvirate of folk-rock extravaganzas: Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" and "Chimes Of Freedom," and Pete Seeger's "The Bells Of Rhymney." These monumental recordings possessed a near-architectural splendor, as diamond-sharp guitar chords cascaded rhythmically beneath majestic vocal harmonies. On these songs, using just guitars, bass, drums, tambourine, and vocals (plus Leon Russell's piano on "Mr. Tambourine Man"), the Byrds created a wall of sound even more monolithic than Phil Spector's orchestral model. It was breathtaking—and it still is.

"Mr. Tambourine Man" hit Number One in a summer of unparalleled Top Forty magnificence. The Beatles' "Ticket To Ride" and its gong-like guitars set the tone; the venom of the Stones' "(I can't get no) Satisfaction" and the goosebump snarl of Dylan's "Like A Rolling Stone" followed in an assertively glorious progression. "Mr. Tambourine Man" was the quirkiest of the bunch; restrained and ambiguous in a way that departed from Dylan's prototype, it was also suggestive and tantalizing, as if those who read between the lines would be let in on some mystic countercultural secret.

"Turn! Turn! Turn!"—another enigmatic anthem (this one drawn from a Biblical passage set to music by Seeger), became the Byrds' second Number One single. Apart from its title track, *Turn! Turn! Turn!* lacked the lofty peaks of its predecessor, but the album's stylistic misfires revealed an ambitious band restless for new worlds to conquer. They began to explore those worlds in late '66 with *Fifth Dimension*, an album so unusual that it inspired a new set of hyphenations: "raga-rock," "jazz-rock," and, most accurately, perhaps, "acid-rock." "Eight Miles High," with its ominous bass line, unearthly vocal harmonies and a fiercely electronic 12-string solo inspired by John Coltrane, was a shattering *tour de force*. As a single, it had the distinction of being one of the first records widely banned because of its alleged drug references; nevertheless, the song reached Number Fourteen on the *Billboard* Hot One Hundred. "Eight Miles High" was also the swan song of Gene Clark, who'd become the band's primary songwriter. Clark's abrupt departure was partly due to his fear of flying; a less ironic but more significant factor was the deterioration of his relationship with band leader McGuinn.





The Byrds, circa 1970:
From left, McGuinn,
Skip Battin, Gene Parsons,
and Clarence White

It foreshadowed things to come for the battling Byrds.

The band's repertoire was short on love songs, and there was a remote quality, a fascination with sheer technique, that suggested the cool precision of hard-core formalists. In this sense, "So You Want To Be A Rock 'n' Roll Star," the opening cut on *Younger Than Yesterday*, the Byrds' fourth LP, was delectably ironic. What fleeting stardom the band attained was the result of the sheer brilliance of their early singles. But their identity had become more elusive as their musical conception took on ever-greater subtlety and sophistication.

The architect of this iconoclasm was McGuinn. Compulsively curious, obsessed with electronic gadgetry, he tinkered with rock & roll as if it were a space-age toy. He also tinkered with the other Byrds, appraising their strengths and weaknesses with a frequently shocking frankness, as if they were merely cogs in a machine he'd built. And yet McGuinn also had the canniness to harness and integrate the special talents of his colleagues: Crosby's flair for vocal harmonies, Hillman's unorthodox approach to electric bass, Gene Clark's

originality as a pop songwriter. Each band member found himself servicing McGuinn's own ideas; not surprisingly, each in time came to resent McGuinn's control. *Younger Than Yesterday* gave the work of both Crosby and Hillman a new prominence, but tensions persisted within the ranks. By the end of 1967, Crosby was gone.

Undaunted, McGuinn set his stripped-down Byrds to work on an ambitious new recording project. To construct his magnum opus, he gathered together the most advanced electronic gear of the day, tossed in a string quartet for balance, and brought in session players to flesh out the surviving trio of original Byrds. The resulting album, *The Notorious Byrd Brothers*, sounded airtight; for the first time, McGuinn had fully developed the implications of his *krrrrriiisssshhhhh* concept. While the songs were a mixed lot—topics included amphetamines, the draft, space exploration, and the language of dolphins—the relentless jet-age drone of the album managed to unify the material into a coherent whole.

The McGuinn/Hillman Byrds made one more





album—and yet another milestone: the rustic *Sweetheart Of The Rodeo*, which initiated the country-rock movement. But that effort was sky-jacked from under the original members by brilliant newcomer Gram Parsons. Michael Clarke faded away; Hillman, according to McGuinn, threw his bass on the floor and walked out for good, going on to form the Flying Burrito Brothers with Parsons.

McGuinn, the one remaining original Byrd, hired various musicians to carry on the concept. These latter-day Byrds, whose focal point was the gorgeously understated playing of gifted guitarist Clarence White, recorded five albums, the best of them *Untitled* (1970), which introduced the McGuinn staple “Chestnut Mare.” They were also a stronger stage band than the original group, thanks to the bracing interaction of McGuinn’s Rickenbacker and White’s Telecaster. But the neo-Byrds lost altitude on their last two studio efforts, and by 1973 the flight was over.

From 1965 through 1968, though, the Byrds were genuine space cowboys, their inventiveness and audacity in the

studio second to none even in those limit-smashing times. Roger McGuinn has mellowed in recent years and returned to the rock arena with his first solo album since the mid-’70s, but he remains one of the great eccentrics of rock & roll. David Crosby, who fought and is finally winning a long battle with drugs, while starring in Crosby, Stills & Nash, remains one of rock’s most extreme personalities. Chris Hillman is now a country music star as leader of the Desert Rose Band. He has never stopped making music and has kept an impressively level head throughout his entire 25-year run. And though the two most talented latter-day band members—Gram Parsons and Clarence White—met untimely deaths, the five original Byrds share a distinction rare among pantheon rock groups: they’re all still alive.

The music of the Byrds endures because of a synchronism of taste, technique, intelligence, and inspiration that, now as then, seems to resonate with the jingle-jangle of destiny itself. Perhaps, as McGuinn once postulated, it was all on tracks.



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Boulevard of

Memories of Sunset Strip, 1963-1966

Golden Dreams

by Jean Rosenbluth

IT'S 1990 MASQUERADING AS 1966. THE WHISKY A GO GO, one of the few remaining vestiges of the Sunset Strip's halcyon days, has been painted burnt orange and decorated with day-glo signs announcing shows by the Byrds and Love, makeup for the role the club will play in *The Doors*, director Oliver Stone's upcoming bio-pic of Jim Morrison & Co. At least one denizen of the '60s Strip isn't fooled, however.

"It looks okay," says Roger McGuinn, then and now the voice of the Byrds. "But all the billboards around there now are for sports and films—there's not much music—and everyone's got a BMW or a Mercedes-Benz. And there's so much smog. . . . It's kind of like *Blade Runner*, you know? It's really sad."

"Sad" is the last word anyone who was there would use to describe the spirit that pervaded "the Freak Out Hot Spots"—as Frank Zappa called them in a map of the area he published in 1966—that lined the Strip and its satellite streets from late 1963 through '67. The city's youth, disillusioned by the assassination of John F. Kennedy but not yet stripped entirely of innocence by drugs or the Vietnam War, descended upon West Hollywood in search of good times and good music. From the Troubadour to Ciro's to Pandora's Box to the Ash Grove they roamed, creating a commotion as surely as they sought to escape one.

"It was brand-new and we were young," says the Byrds' Chris Hillman. "David [Crosby] and I would scream down the Sunset Strip on our Triumph motorcycles, looking for girls. It's different now 'cause everyone rides Harleys, and those were *baaaad*. It was all so innocent then."

Not for long. Memories differ on the circumstances leading up to it, but in November 1966, the cops and the kids clashed near Pandora's Box, at the corner of Sunset and Crescent Heights, in what came to be immortalized in a B-movie as "the riot on Sunset Strip." "There was violence, people were beaten up," says David Anderle, now a vice president at A&M Records and one of the organizers of the protest that night. "It was youth arising against something, but the 'some-

thing' was secondary to the event. It became a national issue."

After that, "there got to be more and more police harassment," remembers Taj Mahal—with Ry Cooder, a member of Strip regulars the Rising Sons. "People would come from the Valley in their cars just to gape and giggle at the people with long hair. But the parents were in for a surprise when some of their kids would come to join us. There got to be a lot of the weekend-hippie syndrome."

WITH THE SUCCESS OF THE BYRDS, Love, the Doors and other rock & roll bands across the country and the ocean, record company executives arrived *en masse* on the Strip, hungry for a piece of the action. "The record companies were great because they gave everyone a shot at their Andy Warhol 15 minutes of fame by making a record," says David Anderle. "But at the same time, when the money started happening was when the whole innocent atmosphere really started to change."

Billy James, then West Coast head of information services for Columbia Records and a "fanatic" for the label's Byrds, watched the shifting scene from the perspective of one about ten years older than its *habitués*.

"I didn't think we were going to change the world, but the kids did," says James, now a personal manager and public relations consultant for the Los Angeles chapter of the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences. "As much as I mourn the loss of that period in which music became a universal medium to express the hopes and fears of a generation, I knew that, politics



Tambourine Men: *The Turtles, folk-rocking the Whisky.*

and philosophy aside, you had to have hit records.”

BEFORE THE SCENE COULD BE co-opted by the record companies or corrupted by the police, however, there had to be a scene. First and foremost came the music. During the early part of the decade, the clubs on the Strip catered to jazz aficionados. But beginning in late 1963, sensing the changes blowin’ in the wind, several venues switched to folk music. Those that didn’t were soon replaced by new nightspots geared toward a young audience. “If you walked down the street with long hair,” recalls one regular Strip denizen, “the club owners would try to hire you on the spot to play rock & roll.” Early incarnations of the Byrds gigged at the Troubadour and Ciro’s for \$150 or \$200 a week, while down the street Jimi Hendrix accompanied Little Richard on guitar at the Whisky a Go Go.

Some all-but-forgotten names were integral to the early scene, before the mid-’65 success of the Byrds’ “Mr. Tambourine Man” and the Turtles’ “It Ain’t Me, Babe” put the labels’ star-making machinery into motion. Hillman recalls learning an early lesson in how to

be a rock & roll star: “The very first band that made an impression on us was called the Gauchos. They were a straight-ahead rock & roll show band with long hair, which was rare in ’64. The Byrds all came from a folk background, and so rock was really new to us.”

Aside from recording a single co-written by one M. Downey, Jr., the Gauchos also had the distinction of being Hispanic—an early symbol of the integration that set the Strip apart from similar scenes elsewhere in America and England. “There are no true firsts, but we were one of the first Hispanic groups to break into the whole thing,” says Gauchos leader Jim Doval, now the director of entertainment for a Reno casino. “In that regard, we were true innovators.”

Taj Mahal is black, and remembers well the growing pains the Strip experienced as it shook off old stereotypes. “Elmer Valentine [an owner of the Trip and the Whisky] was out to integrate the Strip, so the Rising Sons represented that because we were multi-racial. But it took a while to introduce us to audiences. It would start out in the clubs with people being uptight, saying ‘what, we have to be in here with all these people?’ But once the music hit, it was like, ‘we’re all in this together.’”

Beyond the easing of racial barriers, there was a



Power Booth: *Mama Cass Elliot, Terry Melcher, and Lou Adler.*

camaraderie among Strip bands and their fans quite unlike anything around today, according to several observers. "The musicians all intermingled in making their music," says Mahal. "If my little bluesy thing fit with your Appalachian mountain thing, hey, that was all right. I even wound up playing harmonica on one of the Seeds' records."

"It seemed so much like a community," adds Anderle, who claims to have spent almost every night on the Strip during its heyday. "Everyone was involved in one way or another with the bands, whether you were schlepping their equipment or sleeping with them. Whatever band you latched on to, it was like those were your colors."

"The band was a part of the audience and vice versa," recalls McGuinn. "We consciously felt that we shouldn't be aloof, and so there was a lot more interaction then."

LET NO ONE BELIEVE THAT THE Strip was completely egalitarian, however. David Anderle recalls, for example, the social stratification at the Whisky. "The booths were the real power places, where people like Phil Spector, Jim Morrison, and the major groupies gathered. Next came the tables and chairs, and finally there was the dance floor for just the regular fans."

Often, however, the fans were celebrities unto themselves. "The Byrds were quite the darlings of the whole art scene, the creative community," says Chris Hillman. "There were a lot of actors coming to see us. I'll never forget when Lloyd Bridges came to one of our shows, and afterward he put his arm around me and said, 'Son, you were really good.' This was the man I had watched on TV in *Sea Hunt!*"

If any one band served as the focal point for the Sunset Strip scene—and many stress that such a centerpiece didn't exist—it was the Byrds. "Watching the

Byrds play at the Troubadour was watching them create a sociological situation around themselves," says Anderle, who quit his job to hang out full-time on the Strip. "They were 'our' first band. It wasn't Frank Zappa, he was too weird. And it wasn't the Beach Boys, because they weren't part of the scene. The Byrds were homegrown."

"Everyone else was very English-oriented in terms of fashion, the whole Carnaby Street costume thing. But with their Levis and buckskins, the Byrds were the only ones not trying to do the British thing."

The Byrds' sartorial statement might have been more a matter of chance than any conscious effort to be different. They, too, wore matching outfits mimicking the Beatles' suits until fate intervened. "We left the suits at Ciro's one night when we weren't playing, and Little Richard's band stole them," remembers Hillman. "We were so happy, because we absolutely hated them." Freed of their uniforms, the Byrds did all their clothes shopping at a Sunset Plaza boutique called De Voss, specialists in suede, polka dots, mosaic-print shirts, and Pierre Cardin flared whipcord pants. "It was our Carnaby Street," says Hillman.

The Strip was "our" a lot of things, but maybe memories of just what it all meant are clouded by a quarter-century of growing up. Maybe it's best to let the times speak for themselves via these mid-'66 liner notes penned by veteran record executive Andy Wickham for the debut album by Strip regulars the Grass Roots:

"And there they sprawl. . . talking about the sunshine at the ocean today, the bike ride to Big Sur, the new group playing at It's Boss and the apartment they're going to take when they leave home and the sooner the better. What they're really saying is this: There has never been a groovier time to be young. And they're right. . . As Murray the K so delicately put it, 'It's what's happening, baby.' And nobody can argue with that."

And nobody *can* argue with that. There never has been a groovier time—or place—to be young.