

P E R F O R M E R S

THE LOVIN' SPOONFUL

BY JIM BESSMAN



MOST GROUPS AND SOLO ARTISTS WITH ROCK AND Roll Hall of Fame credentials possess a distinct, readily recognizable sound and style, but not so for the Lovin' Spoonful. Like the Beatles and very few others, John Sebastian, Zal Yanovsky, Steve Boone and Joe Butler stand out for their almost unparalleled musical range represented by the group's timeless Sixties hit singles.

After all, this was a band that took elements from folk music, jug band, ragtime, country, rock and pop to shape songs as diverse as the riveting rock smash "Summer in the City" and the playful country-music salute "Nashville Cats." Few artists could have gotten away with such variety – or had the songwriting and instrumental prowess necessary to successfully pull it off. But the Lovin' Spoonful had both the requisite chops and broad stylistic background, having come out of the fertile early-Sixties Greenwich Village music scene.

The group's frontman, John Sebastian, was actually born in the Village, on Bank Street. The son of the great classical chromatic harmonica player John Sebastian, he paid his dues in the Village coffee-houses and clubs, playing with the likes of Fred Neil, Tim Hardin, John Hammond Jr. and legendary bluesman Mississippi John Hurt.





It was Hurt's song "Coffee Blues," with its line "I wanna see my baby, 'bout a lovin' spoonful" that provided a name for the peerless band, which brought together Sebastian's folkier acoustic leanings – a jug-band veteran, he played autoharp, harmonica and Irish harp in addition to various guitars and keyboard instruments – and Zal Yanovsky's more rock-oriented electric lead guitar.

BOTTOM: ZAL
YANOVSKY, JOHN
SEBASTIAN, JOE
BUTLER, STEVE
BOONE, 1966

Hailing from Canada, Yanovsky had lived on a kibbutz in Israel before being introduced to Sebastian by their mutual musical comrade Cass Elliot. Sebastian and Yanovsky had performed with Elliot in the

Village with the Mugwumps, which included another future Mamas and the Papas vocalist Denny Doherty, also a musical associate of Yanovsky. Fittingly, Sebastian and Yanovsky met at Elliot's house on the night of the Beatles' first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964. They were soon joined by Steve Boone, who had played bass in rock & roll bands on Long Island, and drummer Joe Butler, who'd been in a band with Steve's brother. The Lovin' Spoonful honed their eclectic skills in a slimy hotel-basement rehearsal space, resolving at the outset to sound different with each successive single.

It almost didn't get that far, however. The Spoonful's uniqueness, as evidenced by the mix of Sebastian's autoharp and Yanovsky's electric guitar on their first single, "Do You Believe in Magic," scared off the major record companies in New York. But luckily it impressed Phil Spector, who saw them perform at the Night Owl Cafe and wanted to produce them. Unwilling to sacrifice their artistic aspirations

for Spector's sure-handed but overpowering production methods, the Lovin' Spoonful decided to forgo Spector's own magic. But the fledgling group did benefit from what Sebastian would later call "the Pope's blessing," as Spector's appearance piqued interest from other record business luminaries – and the Lovin' Spoonful would include the Mann-Weil-Spector composition "You Baby" on their debut album.

The group signed with Kama Sutra after cutting four tracks for an Elektra Records compilation in exchange for four desperately needed huge amplifiers. Sebastian had worked numerous Elektra sessions, and the label's founder, Jac Holzman, had become a fan of the Spoonful and knew the group would eventually hit it big. But the band chose not to sign with Elektra, which at the time was primarily a folk label. And while "Do You Believe in Magic?" was surely folk influenced, it was also Motown inspired: Utilizing the same chord progression as "Heat Wave," the song signified a change in the Spoonful's audience at the Night Owl Cafe, which had been a





beatnik hangout but was attracting younger crowds who liked the group's Chuck Berry covers.

"Do You Believe in Magic" reached Number Nine in 1965, the first of seven straight Top Ten singles for the group, who – like the Beatles and few others at the time – wrote its own material and played its own instruments on record. The lovely pop follow-up hit "You Didn't Have to Be so Nice" also employed autoharp, but it was the only concession the band would make to sounding anything near its predecessor.

The other singles in the string of Top Tens would likewise differ markedly from each other. The lazy "Daydream" was an attempt to rewrite "Baby Love" during the Lovin' Spoonful's tour of the South with the Supremes, though you'd never know from the final product. "Did You Ever Have to Make Up Your Mind?" featured ragtime guitar picking, while the keyboard and car horn-heavy 1966 chart-topping rock classic "Summer in the City" intentionally set up so much tension in the beginning that the chorus was designed to give an aural equivalent of falling off a cliff. But the gentle "Rain on the Roof," which followed, was a typical turnabout, combining Irish harp with

twelve-string guitar. "Nashville Cats," meanwhile, not only showcased the group's instrumental facility – Sebastian had been playing pedal steel guitar for only forty-five minutes before cutting the tune – it paid tribute to the then-overlooked musicianship of country pickers.

The Lovin' Spoonful's remaining hits, "Darling Be Home Soon," "Six O'Clock" and "She Is Still a Mystery" are equally memorable and show greater production values. But Yanovsky had departed prior to "She Is Still a Mystery," which reached Number Twenty-seven in late 1967 with Jerry Yester filling his spot. Sebastian then set off on his solo career, leaving the others to cut the group's final album,

Revelation: Revolution '69.

Sebastian, of course, scored a Number One hit in 1976 with his TV theme from *Welcome Back, Kotter*. Having turned down an offer to join Crosby, Stills and Nash, he has since returned to his jug-band roots and currently heads John Sebastian and the J-Band. Yanovsky toured Scandinavia with the J-Band in the summer of 1997, but has long been a successful restaurateur in Ontario, Canada.

As for Boone, Butler and Yester, they continue to maintain a semi-Spoonful act – which probably isn't hard.

Though much has changed since the Lovin' Spoonful's mid-Sixties heyday, great songs and great recordings never go out of style. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction of the Lovin' Spoonful recognizes the contributions of a singular group whose magnificent body of work, while commercially well-received twenty-five years ago, can be seen now as not only historic, but everlasting.

VILLAGE PEOPLE:
THE LOVIN' SPOONFUL
HANGIN' OUT IN
THEIR NEW YORK
CITY 'HOOD, 1966

