



Traffic

By John Milward

THE WORD TRAFFIC IS FREQUENTLY FOLLOWED BY JAM. FOR the British rock band Traffic, the musical jam session began in the spring of 1967 at a country cottage in Berkshire, England. As the quartet wrote and rehearsed, member Steve Winwood's soulful voice and wailing organ could be heard on the radio via "Gimme Some Lovin'" and "I'm a Man," monster hits from his previous band, the Spencer Davis Group. Now wood-

shedding with Winwood were guitarist Dave Mason, drummer Jim Capaldi and the horn-blowing Chris Wood. The resulting album, *Mr. Fantasy*, fit right into a year that saw the release of *Sgt. Pepper* and the rise of San Francisco psychedelic bands Jefferson Airplane and Grateful Dead. And the song "Dear Mr. Fantasy" was a monster jam of keyboards and guitars that could go on pretty much forever.

In 1994, two decades after the original band broke up,



Winwood and Capaldi re-formed Traffic and toured with the king of the jam bands, the Grateful Dead, who played "Dear Mr. Fantasy" when Traffic did not. In 2002, Winwood attended the annual gathering of jam bands, the Bonnaroo Music Festival, and sat in with Widespread Panic and the String Cheese Incident, making his "long strange trip" slightly more typical than that of his buddies, the Dead. His journey was that of a gifted singer and musician.

By expanding rock's instrumental palette, Traffic broke new ground in popular music. Wood's flute and sax added novel textures while Capaldi embroidered his drumbeats with flavorful percussion. Winwood's keyboards were fuel for Mason's guitar, and they were both turning into marvelous songwriters. But in the end, Traffic was stalled by its inability to keep Winwood and Mason in the same band. Traffic's legacy rests largely on four terrific albums: *Mr. Fantasy* (1967), *Traffic* (1968), *John Barleycorn Must Die* (1970) and *The Low Spark of High Heeled Boys* (1971). The first two feature the original quartet, and the others are essentially great Winwood albums; all four have influenced generations of musicians.

Not long after Stephen Lawrence Winwood was born in

Above: Jim Capaldi, Dave Mason, Chris Wood and Steve Winwood (from left)



Expanding rock's palette, Traffic broke new ground

Birmingham, England (on May 12, 1948), he was playing drums, guitar and piano. Winwood played his first public gig at the age of eight, and in 1963, he and his elder brother, Muff, joined guitarist Spencer Davis and drummer Pete



Winwood was the famous face in a group of equals

York in the Rhythm and Blues Quartet. Within a year, the band had changed its name to the Spencer Davis Group and hooked up with an enterprising manager, Chris Blackwell, who would later sign Traffic to his record label, Island. With his powerful voice and keyboard work, Winwood was an instant star, hailed as a teenage Ray Charles. In 1965, he recorded with guitarist Eric Clapton in Powerhouse, an ad hoc group that contributed three tracks to the influential Elektra compilation *What's Shakin'*. It wouldn't be the last time Winwood and Clapton shared a stage.

Things moved fast in the swinging sixties, when two albums a year and a single every three months was business as usual. In Traffic, Winwood was the famous face in a group formed as a band of equals, and there were strains from the start. Winwood mostly collaborated on songs with Capaldi (born August 24, 1944), who typically wrote the lyrics. They got an occasional assist from Wood (born June 24, 1944); Mason (born May 10, 1944) wrote by himself. Traffic's debut album was preceded by two singles: Winwood and Capaldi's trippy, sitar-tipped "Paper Sun," which reached the U.K. Top Five, and Mason's somewhat more conventional "Hole in My Shoe," which was an even bigger hit. But Winwood felt Mason's song didn't represent the sound he wanted for the group, and by the time *Mr. Fantasy* was released, in December 1967 (under its original title, *Heaven Is in Your Mind*), Traffic was a trio.

A few months later, after Traffic had made an unheralded U.S. tour and was due to record a second album, Mason was wooed back into the group. The first two Traffic

albums, both produced by Jimmy Miller, who would subsequently produce the Rolling Stones, sound quite different from each other. A rather lavish production, *Mr. Fantasy* featured dense instrumentation

blended into a psychedelic weave. By contrast, *Traffic*, released in November 1968, seemed clean and snappy—clearly the work of musicians maturing as both writers and players. Highlights included Winwood and Capaldi's "Pearly Queen" and "Forty Thousand Headmen," Mason's joyfully communal "You Can All Join In" and his greatest hit, "Feelin' Alright?"

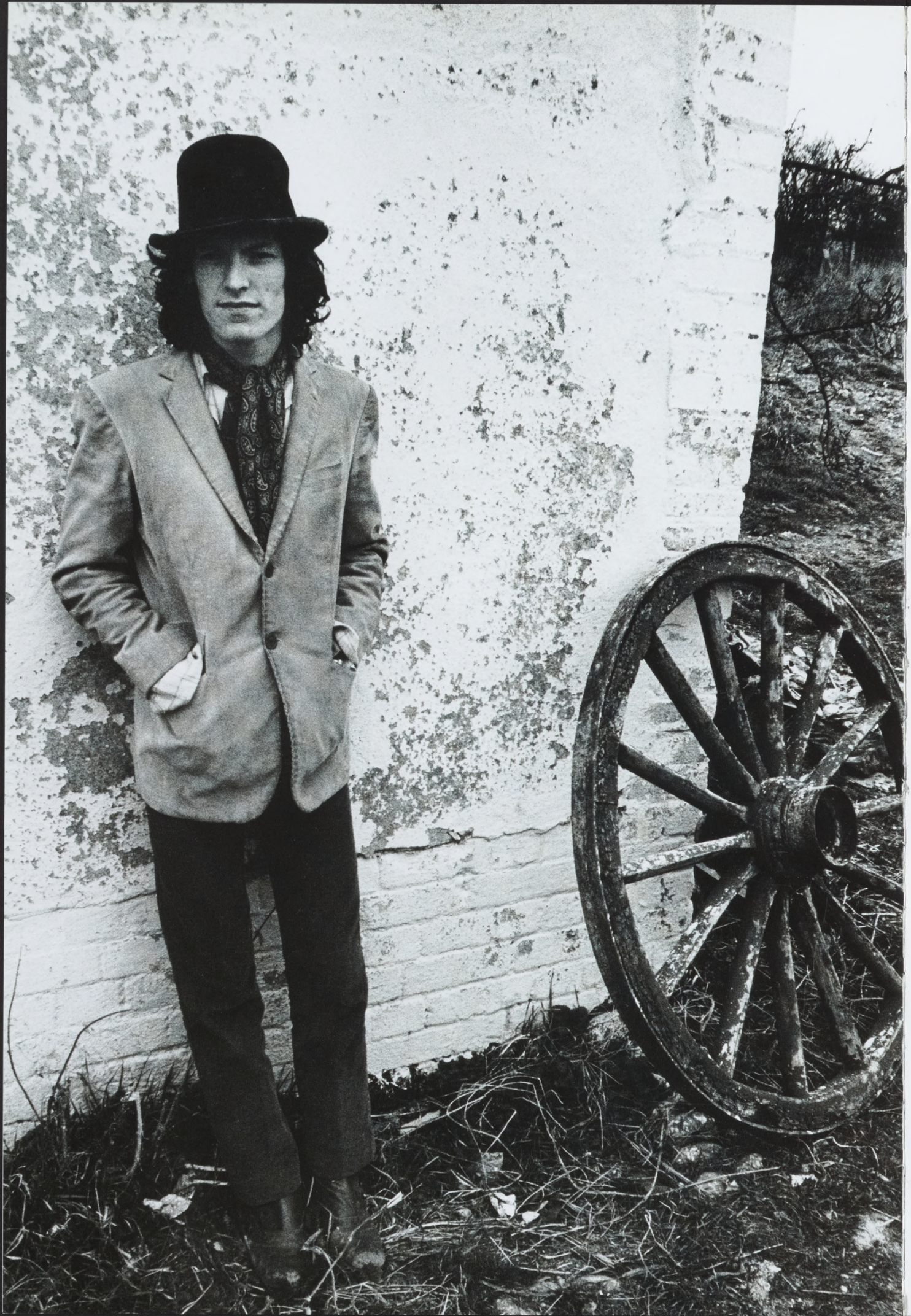
Traffic should have been an exciting new start for the quartet; instead, it was a last gasp. The group broke up just two months after its release. Winwood was soon playing with Eric Clapton, and after they were joined by Clapton's drummer from Cream, Ginger Baker, they became Blind Faith, pop music's first so-called supergroup. Pop history is littered with dubious career moves, but is there a sixties-rock fan alive who wouldn't trade Blind Faith's one LP for more albums by Cream and the original Traffic? Still, Blind Faith's self-titled debut featured one of Winwood's best compositions, the wonderfully wistful "Can't Find My Way Home."

It speaks to Traffic's high regard that Winwood and Mason were employed on numerous important recording sessions. Both men appeared on Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland*, and Winwood was featured on Joe Cocker's star-laden debut, *With a Little Help From My Friends*, which included the perhaps definitive version of Mason's "Feelin' Alright?" Winwood was a natural on keyboards for London sessions featuring such American blues legends as Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf, while Mason played on the Rolling Stones' *Beggars Banquet* and George Harrison's *All Things Must Pass*. It's just too bad that Winwood and Mason failed to build on the vibrant sound of Traffic's unsurpassed second album.

Fresh out of Blind Faith, Winwood planned to launch a

Above: Wood (left) and Winwood. Right: Traffic as a trio: Capaldi, Winwood and Wood (from left).





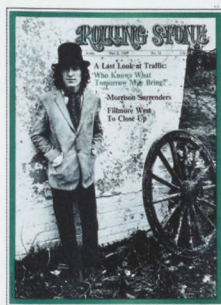


Wood, Roger
Hawkins, David
Hood, Rebop Kwaku
Baah, Capaldi and
Winwood (from left)

solo career in 1970, but when he invited Capaldi and Wood to help him in the recording studio, the project quickly became Traffic's third studio album, *John Barleycorn Must Die*. Winwood's beautifully sung version of the traditional folk tune "John Barleycorn" showcased the acoustic side of Traffic. On the instrumental "Glad," keyboards riffed alongside a saxophone, suggesting a funky style of jazz rock. *John Barleycorn Must Die* quickly became a staple of the era's progressive-rock radio and earned Traffic its first gold album. Rik Grech, who'd played bass with Winwood in Blind Faith, was recruited to fill out the group's live sound. This was the first of many changes in the Traffic lineup.

By the time Traffic recorded 1971's *Low Spark of High Heeled Boys*, the band also included drummer Jim Gordon and percussionist Rebop Kwaku Baah. The album, which eventually went platinum, reached Number Seven on the U.S. charts, and the twelve-minute title track, with its memorable keyboard hook and squawking saxophone, cooled out many a party. Traffic released a pair of live albums (1971's *Welcome to the Canteen* and 1973's *Traffic - On the Road*) and two more studio efforts (1973's *Shoot Out at the Fantasy Factory* and 1974's *When the Eagle Flies*) before the group officially called it quits.

As the voice of Traffic, Winwood was in the best position to pursue a solo career, but he did not hit his commercial stride until 1981's *Arc of a Diver*, on which he played all the instruments and sang lyrics by others, including Will Jennings, who became a frequent songwriting partner. In 1985, Winwood's *Back in*



Left: "A last look at Traffic": Winwood as depicted on the May 6, 1969, cover of 'Rolling Stone,' pictured above

"John Barleycorn" showed Traffic's acoustic side

the High Life lived up to its title, selling more than three million copies and giving him a Number One single, "Higher Love." Winwood topped the chart again in 1988 with the title song of another multiplatinum album, *Roll With It*.

Mason's post-Traffic career began with 1970's highly regarded *Alone Together* and took an unlikely detour for a collaboration with Mama Cass Elliot of the Mamas and the Papas; he scored his biggest solo hit in 1977 with a Number Twelve song, "We Just Disagree." Mason remains active as a solo artist, and in 1994, he joined Fleetwood Mac for one album (*Time*). Capaldi has released sixteen albums over the past thirty years and has had his greatest success in Europe. Wood died of liver failure in 1983.

Winwood celebrated his fortieth year in the music business in 2003 with the release of *About Time*, a self-produced collection for his own label that revealed a far different Winwood than the polished hitmaker of the 1980s. Winwood, who'd fallen from the commercial highlife, was once more behind his Hammond B-3 organ, leading a small group through songs cut live in the studio. The improvised sounds harked back to that cottage in the country, where long ago and far away, four hippies jammed deep into the British night. "Dear Mr. Fantasy," they sang, "play us a tune, something to make us all happy." Mission accomplished. □