GIGAJE

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ZIGZAG

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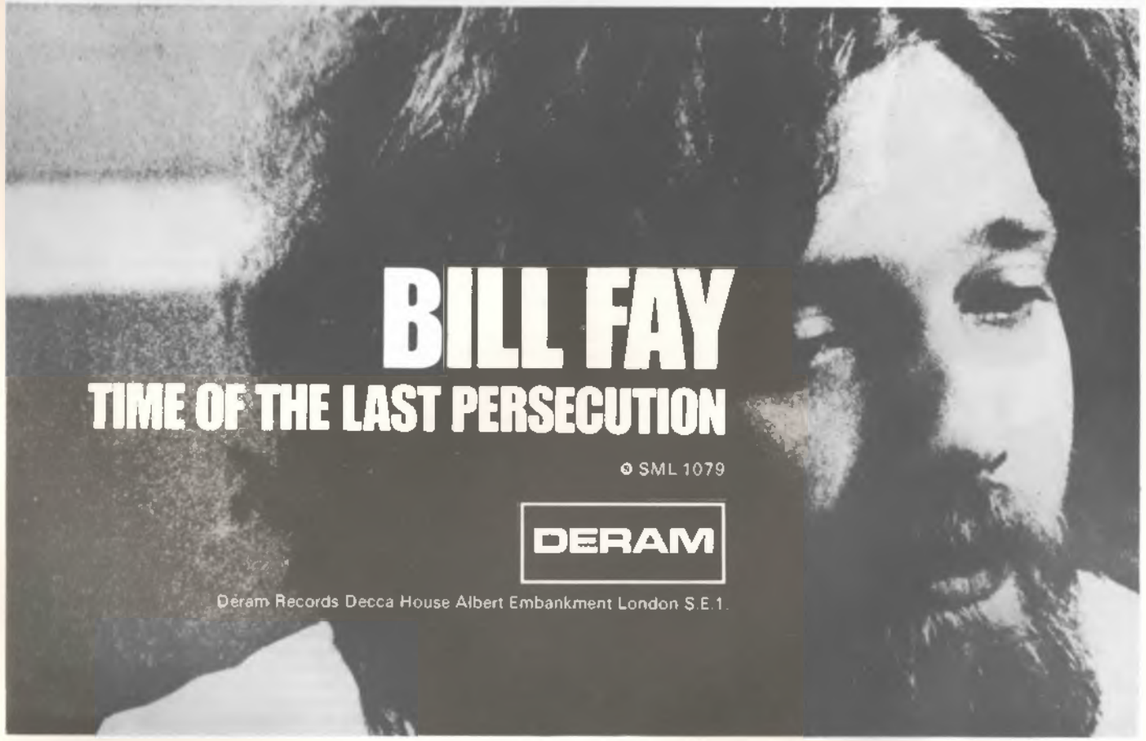

tony m°phee ...groundhog

ZZ: Can we talk about your new album first? How did it come to be called 'Split'?

TM: Well it mainly refers to schizophrenia, a split personality....but in effect, it's more than that; it's a split mind and body - a natural mind release, distinct from any drug or otherwise artificially induced condition. It's something that happened to me around last May, and the first side of the album is about that, though it doesn't really say much because technically I don't know that much about it. But it was pretty awful, all in all - your mind is not really yours; it's miles away. I talked to people about it, but they didn't really understand, and then after a while I found that Ken (Pustelnik, the Groundhogs drummer) had been getting it as well. Now, I've never really bothered with drugs, because I feel that if you need them, fair enough, but I didn't think I did - they couldn't do anything for me that I couldn't do myself - but Ken had been pretty much a drug advocate (in its mildest form, that is), and he stopped it altogether, because when he smoked, he found it concentrated his mind on it. Since then though, I've come across a lot of people who went through the same thing.

ZZ: You were lucky not to have been thrown off the rails completely.

TM: Well I was fortunate, yes, because I was reading this Yoga book which described the whole condition. In effect, what these people do is spend years preparing their minds for the moment they achieve mind release; but it takes years, and if it happens prematurely it can cause permanent derangement. And at one time, I was pretty close to this....I felt it to an almost suicidal degree....I used to wake up and feel really down because it was still happening, because I was still alive almost.

ZZ: How did all this manifest itself then?

TM: Well it's really difficult to explain, but all of a sudden you feel like a stranger, and there becomes no such person as yourself....and though, as I say, a lot of people are actually trying to achieve this state, it gets extremely frightening if you can't understand it all. I can joke about it now, but at the time I seemed to lose my entire personality - for instance I never talked to anyone, because nothing seemed to be worth saying. But, like I say, I can't really explain it....and I don't reach any conclusions on the album - it's just an account of what happened, that's all.

ZZ: Do you still feel any after effects?

TM: Well, if I do, I've got used to them now, and though I can still induce a sudden detachment, it's not nearly so terrifying. It was just like having one huge question thrust upon you and you can't find an answer.

ZZ: Has writing about it helped to get it out of your system?

TM: Certainly. And the fact that other people recognised my condition removed the feeling of loneliness - like I thought I was about to go insane at one stage - and maybe the record might help people in similar circumstances....I don't know. The trouble is that there are too many albums based around people trying to get their minds across, when their minds just haven't got much to offer, and when I hear something like that it always puts me off. I mean, I'm even dubious about John Lennon ....I could say "that's great", but I could also say "that's rubbish"....I mean, he's proved that he's a very complex person, but you could also say that the lyrics are simple and naive - you could go round in circles talking about it. But when you get

an unknown band coming up with very involved and personal lyrics, I don't like it. On 'Split' I think we've acheived a good and interesting overall sound, and the lyrics are there for anyone who wants to listen to them.

ZZ: When you write, do you write music around lyrics, or vice versa?

TM: Lyrics always come last....basically I potter around with chord sequences until I find something I like, and then I fit a tune to it. Then I think about the lyrics last of all.....to the extent that I didn't have the lyrics of two of the songs on the album until the mix. I can't just sit down and write a complete number....we work on the music in the rehearsal room and I just shout out nonsensey lyrics while the music is pulling itself together. Then, when we're ready, I hunt around for a lyric.

ZZ: Let's get onto your equipment....why the change to Laney gear?

TM: Well, I liked the stuff we used to have but it just literally became obsolete. I built my own amplifier and it was what I wanted, but I never got round to putting it in a cabinet and people used to drop it because it was just mounted in a sort of rabbit hutch thing and wasn't screwed in properly. But I couldn't replace the broken parts because they were so old, and we had to think about some new gear. We shopped around - looked at HiWatt and Marshall, but eventually settled for Laney. There's not really much to choose between makes, but this Laney stuff gave out what it claimed to give out and seemed OK....though I've made some alterations to improve the tone, because I'm as interested in getting a good sound as I am in volume.

ZZ: What do these watt ratings mean? Can you give us a layman's definition?

TM: The wattage is an electrical term, but sound power is also termed in watts. Ten watts of audio power, acoustically, is a very large orchestra; but when you say 10 watts electrically, it's 10 watts that the amplifier gives out....and any speakers are, at the most, only ten per cent efficient - so the sound power given out is only one watt. You can go up to about 30 watts, and each step of 10 watts is about twice as loud. But above that it gets a lot more complicated, and to get twice the volume of 30 watts, you'd have to have about 200 watts....and to get twice as loud as 200 watts, you'd need about 2 000 watts. But it's the quality that's important rather than sheer volume.

ZZ: What about producing your albums? Do you feel that being such an intrinsic part of the music, you're not remote enough to see the work as a whole? I mean, an independent producer would possibly have a different idea of Pete Cruickshank's role as bass player, for instance.

TM: Well, Pete told me the other day that he thought he could make a better job of the records if he had more rehearsal time before we cut the track, and I suppose it is, in effect, much more my record than Pete and Ken's....for instance, I write the bass parts too. But it just so happens that as well as singing and playing lead, I write the numbers as well - though if one of the others came up with a song, that would be fair enough.

ZZ: Have they ever tried?

TM: Well, Ken wrote one once, and it was very nice, but it was very much his kind of song. The thing is that I know my singing and playing capabilities, and I've got to be happy with the material. But it works very well - I think because we don't take it too seriously, like most bands do. As I say, I get an idea and we embellish it - Ken goes bash bash, and Pete goes thump thump, and we shove it into some sort of shape.

ZZ: You are in fact a very happy group, aren't you?

TM: Yes - the only aggravation we suffer is caused by outside elements like agencies and such. We have very little back-biting or quarelling within the group. I mean, Pete is basically very lazy - he plays because he likes it and because it brings him a bit of bread - and that's it....that's his philosophy as far as I can make out, but perhaps he's much deeper in private life. Then there's Ken, who's got a lot of ideals and is very right about most things. It's a good balance.

ZZ: Let's go back to the original John Lee and the Groundhogs - how did you come to join them in the first place?

TM: Well I had my own band called The Seneschals, and then John Lee asked me to join them for a German tour. They were called the Dollar Bills at that time, and had a sax player who I managed to get rid of - and I also managed to get them into R&B, which I'd become interested in via Cyril Davies and various others. So we went into R&B and then into blues very deeply - to the extent that I spent most of my time delving into books and records to find material which hadn't been done by any of the other English bands (this was in the R&B/Yardbirds/Animals/Pretty Things/days).

ZZ: Was Roy Fisher your manager in those days too?

TM: Yes - John Lee, who was the singer

in the old group, had got pissed at a party about a year before I joined, and Roy had happened to carry him home. He discover- John had a band and became their manager. Since then the factor that gets us going has always been Roy; you see, I'm as lazy as Pete really, and though I've got a lot of ambition to do things, I don't particularly want to start them off. But Roy always manages to get us moving. . . . and he was instrumental in the reforming of the group too.

ZZ: And what happened to John Lee?

TM: Well at the moment he's working for Roy, managing his other bands.

ZZ: Have you ever thought of augmenting the group on stage?

TM: No, not really - it works too well as it is.

ZZ: You'd have to split the bread more. . .

TM: Yeah, that's what I must be trying to say. . . . but that's a very valid point actually, because we're just a trio and it's still pretty difficult.

ZZ: What about records? You've never thought of bringing in Moogs and what have you?

TM: No, I'm not really a weird noise freak. I think it's much better and cleverer to get a strange sound out of an ordinary instrument, which is why I admired Hendrix so much. He could make Moog noises with a guitar, and though I don't consciously try to copy him, I do sometimes get similar effects.

ZZ: Yes, and the wah-wah pedal often accentuates the similarity. . .

TM: Well, a lot of people don't realise about wah-wahs. . . . I mean, every little step you bring it down is a different tone, and you can get all sorts of noises from it. I've also got an octave splitter which sounds great through the Laney gear - it gives you an octave above and an octave below. Hendrix uses one on 'Machine Gun' - it gives a sort of modulated note, where you have the note and other frequencies with it which aren't really related, so you end up with a weird sort of dischordant sound. And I'm just discovering exactly what you can get out of this device.

ZZ: What about Ken's drumming technique - he gets pretty carried away sometimes, doesn't he?

TM: Right. . . . he doesn't follow any pattern - he's really against the funky type drummers; the sort that about 90% of American bands have. . . . he just wallops everything in sight and sometimes I lose him completely. Like I often come back in during a solo and can't work out where he is - so I just have to play a note and let it feed back until I can find my way back in. And Pete doesn't help either, because he's all over the place and he follows me rather than Ken. . . so when we fall apart, we really fall apart.

ZZ: Do you play your solo number on stage because the audience have come to expect it of you, or what?

TM: No. . . . I don't think they expect me to do it;I sometimes get asked to play it, but it's for a number of reasons. It gives the audience some relief, because we're pretty constantly belting it out, although we bring it up and down during a number - but all of our stuff is pretty forceful. As well as that, the audience usually feels some sympathy for a poor sod standing out there all by himself. I used to do 'Groundhog' or 'Gasoline', but now I do 'Me and the devil'.

ZZ: 'Groundhog' is on the new album too, I see.

TM: Yes. . . we took a lot of time to get a stereo spread on that track - so it's not just a guitar in the middle. We used about 10 mikes to spread it along, but unfortunately it'll probably just sound like one guitar up the middle on most people's stuff, which is one of the troubles of making records. . . . the equipment they're played on has to be pretty good to reproduce the effects.

ZZ: Do you think the new album is better than 'Thank Christ for the bomb'?

TM: It's different. . . . it creates a different mood to me. 'Thank Christ' always left me feeling very satisfied; this one leaves me satisfied, but irritated too because it's so much more vicious and intense. All the numbers poke you somehow, whereas the last one relied on melody more and was comparatively relaxing.

ZZ: Apart from the fact that it was a good album, what factors contributed towards making 'Thank Christ' such a big seller?

TM: Well I think we were lucky. I thought that if any of our records would sell, then 'Thank Christ' would, but you need more than that - you've either got to have hype or enough exposure to get your name well known. I think Radio One had a lot to do with it - John Peel certainly helped us a lot, and we did several live bits on various programmes but the biggest factor was probably Disco 2 . . . . we were on that two weeks running and I'm sure that was very important.

ZZ: What was Disco 2 like? Was it the miming to a backing track thing?

TM: That's right. . . . it was a very strange experience, because Ken can't mime to his drumming and I can't mime to my guitar solos because I can't often remember what I played. Anyway, they stick you in this studio, standing on a chalk mark on the floor, and you have to sing to music coming out of this speaker on the other side of the room. Well, Ken was between me and the speaker, connecting with the odd thump thump, and it took all my powers of concentration to pull it off. . . . but the looks of intense concentration on our faces suited the material, so it turned out OK.

ZZ: Let's talk about bands that you like - Hendrix you said was one of your big influences. . . . who else specifically?

TM: I really don't know - as far as records go, I'm completely lost. I have this hang-up about buying albums and playing them on my equipment, which is pretty ropey. . . so until I get my new stuff, I don't want to foul up any records with a worn needle and things like that. Apart from that, I get very little time really to sit down and listen to records. . . . my time is taken up by 90% playing, 5% fixing up amps which have gone wrong, and 5% doing nothing, and the only time I listen to music is on Top Gear and a few other programmes. When I do get my new system fixed up, I'll rectify all this.

ZZ: What about live groups?

TM: I enjoy Writing on the Wall - their singer really kills me. . . . their humour has me rolling about; it's so gross and horrible. As a band, they're not brilliant at all - just solid - but they're pretty good. Who else is there? The Who I enjoy, although I go along with criticisms of them being to teenyboppery. . . . Daltrey with all his fringed suede and microphone whirling. . . . but I like them OK.

ZZ: What about the Floyd?

TM: Well I haven't seen them for some time. Last time I did was at Manchester when they were recording 'Umma Gumma', but I didn't see much of that because I was standing on a balcony with about 500 other people, and I've got a thing about collapsing buildings, so I shot off. But funnily enough, we don't get much chance to see other bands these days because we are usually the top band at gigs now and the support group is seldom a name band.

ZZ: Have you seen any support bands lately that you think will make it?

TM: Um. . . . no. It's pretty bad, and pretty crowded at the moment. As well as that, I must admit that I spend more time playing football machines than I do listening to the other group. I can't really listen to most bands for more than about a quarter of an hour anyway, because I tend to look for a bit of quiet when I'm not actually playing myself. So, in that sense, I think that the only people who can keep up with the new bands, new records and so on, are people like yourself, who take an interest in that sort of thing. I mean, if I watch another guitarist, I try and find bad points about him no matter how good he is. . . . it's a case of not wanting to think anyone else is better than you are.

ZZ: Are you looking forward to a day in the not too distant future when you only need to do about a couple of gigs a week?

TM: Yeah, I suppose I am. We've been working quite a lot recently, but it's been enjoyable and we've been going down well, but there was a period a while back when we reached a point where it just all went along the same. And when it gets like that, it gets a bit much. What I'd really like is more time to experiment, because the only time I have for that now is at gigs - and you can't do too much then because you have an obligation to the audience.

ZZ: It wasn't too long ago though, when you really had a thin time getting gigs.

TM: Right. About eighteen months ago we were lucky to get a gig a week, and we lived from week to week relying on that gig. . . and if it was cancelled, we were really in trouble. Gradually we've got to the stage where we can afford our three roadies, and where we get top billing, but I've been in bands for about 10 years now.

ZZ: Most of your contemporaries in the early sixties seemed to make it earlier than you did - was that because they were manipulated by their managements more?

TM: Basically, I think it was own fault that I didn't get on in the same way. . . . I think I had something different, but I just couldn't be bothered; it was good enough for me to drift along. I mean, when I was in the old group, Jeff Beck's Tridents used to support us at Eel Pie Island, and I remember seeing the Yardbirds at the Star in Croydon not long after they'd begun. Clapton was playing a very warped Kay, so warped that the only way he could play it was by putting a capo on halfway up the neck at the point of most bend, and the bassplayer's bass had no frets on it. And they went leaping up.

ZZ: You could have become better known if you'd joined Mayall.

TM: Yeah - he came round and offered me £40 a week, but I was quite happy with the Groundhogs. . . . I thought they were going to make it.

ZZ: Well they have done, second time around. John

QUIVER

A YEAR ON THE ROAD

Friday 15th January. 5pm. My feet (not to mention the more tender extremities of my body) froze off about an hour ago.

Let me explain. About 4 weeks ago I interviewed Quiver at The Blues Loft in High Wycombe (just before our friends in blue closed the place down on a technicality), but I was hardly satisfied - I skimped it, left big spaces in the areas about which I wanted to talk, and generally made a most unsatisfactory balls-up of the whole thing. So I phoned up John Curd, who was their manager then, to see if they were playing anywhere within a 50 mile radius of North Marston at any time. They were not - so I thought it would be a good idea to go on a gig with them in their van.... thereby getting loads of time to extort the sordid details.

I was to go to Huddersfield with them. Huddersfield, an innocuous sounding place famed as Harold Wilson's birthplace and the town where Jeff Cloves went to College. That was all I knew about the place (and, it transpired, all that I was going to know - apart from discovering that it was just another Northern town with a stereotyped new town centre development). Anyway, I arranged to meet them at the Newport Pagnell service area on the M1 at 3pm. Great. I arrived in good time, had some coffee, and drifted down to the end of the slip road so I could lean against the carpark sign, watch the cars zoom by (little things please little minds) and prepare to leap aboard as they wheeled off the motorway.

As it was, I merely provided a spectacle for lorry drivers' derisive abuse ("Ha ha bloody ha to you and all mate, you ...."). They're bound to turn up in a minute. I kept thinking that, as the minutes ticked by and the cold and misery slowly seeped through my insubstantial clothing. Time continued to roll by, and still I optimistically peered out into the fog and light drizzle. No van. Not a bloody sign of it.

So I'm back in the cafeteria for a swift coffee, a spot of note jotting, and then I'm off like a rocket - back to the warmth of our 2kw fan heater. But first, a phone call to see what happened. It's OK - they're on their way.... Bruce had to take his girlfriend to hospital.

Well, I eventually spotted their van at about 6 o'clock, by which time the level of my wrath had subsided once again and I remembered that time is something you just don't get flustered about in the rock world.... a few hours here and there are nothing to get worked up about. Like Tim said "It's no good getting uptight just because you think you're going to be late for a gig, or else you'll play badly". Dave the roadie thought otherwise; "we're supposed to be there at 7, and we've got 130 miles to go".

130 miles in 55 minutes? The journey was resumed.

Meanwhile, what about Quiver? Well, 1970 rarely provided me with any substantial relief from the grinding tedium and mediocrity which seemed determined to clog the radio, TV, records, clubs, concerts and the like, but every once in a while something turned up to nourish my taste buds and haul me out of the doldrums and nostalgic reveries about the good old days and albums that you could dig all the way through. Hardly any of the new bands which sprang out of last year justified their nerve to try and make it as professional musicians, in my opinion, but Quiver got to me immediately - to the extent that I think they're one of the freshest, most exhilarating bands going; wandering the country lanes instead of trying to get on the worn out, overcrowded loud/heavy road. In their first twelve months they've gained a high measure of popularity, an even higher reputation, done a lot of hard work, been through a few personnel hang ups, just about achieved a peak of tightness and unity, and have earned themselves the sort of charisma which brings the record companies clustering for their signatures. It's good to see it happening - good to see a band holding the aces and dictating the negotiations, rather than having their balls screwed off by a bad contract.

Dusk over Watford Gap.... very romantic, I don't think. The anonymous Transit trundles along, shaking and vibrating. There was a time when the word Quiver would have been emblazoned over the side, with messages in lipstick and dust declaring teenage desires. Times change. Dave the roadie sucks at his pipe, stares out into the night and keeps the needle between 70 and 80. Meanwhile the band remain strangely silent, sitting impassively - hardly seeming to speak except to offer a toffee or a pull at the orange squash. I've got backache already, and the bloody thing is draughty as hell - I suppose you get used to it; though I often wonder how many musicians ever regret their choice of career as they sit there daydreaming and trundling around England at all hours of the day and night. I prefer my role of occasional witness, though obviously none of Quiver regrets his choice .... and they've all been through some thin, if not intolerable, times. (The years have been worth it for them because there can be no doubt that they're going to make it in a very big way this year.... but think of the thousands who'll never make it but plod on like punters doing the football pools each week, convinced they'll hit the jackpot one day, but never get more than 6 draws).

Quiver's history is short but comparatively turbulent - which is why we made that chart over there. Basically, the group grew out of Village. Village, a trio led by Peter Bardens, had decided to seek a guitarist, and Cal (for Calvin - that's a very hard name) Batchelor, fresh from Canada, was chosen - mainly because in ability "he stood head and shoulders above the rest". Bruce Thomas said that - but he left Village almost simultaneously with Cal's joining. (All very complicated, this is - check the chart if you get lost).

Cal arrived from the west coast

of Canada,having been playing in what he called an"upholstered sewer" - a cabaret "but don't take the piss please". Few Canadian bands make it, and most ambitious Canadians go to the States - e.g. Neil Young, Bruce Palmer, Zal Yanovsky, Joni Mitchell, etc - but Cal chose to come over here.... "it's in the commonwealth, and there's a lot less hassle!".

Bruce, a walking fund of stories about his career (tales of getting his big double bass stuck in a bus at Salford, one of his group's van being used by a bloke who whizzed round the country picking up wellington boots for re-treading, etc), reckoned he was still pretty naive when he joined Village: "I went through the whole acid head change thing and it did me in eventually... I should have been in a band like Quiver a year ago". He split from Village in circumstances which the pop press would inevitably describe as "amicable - a divergence of musical direction", and rehearsed hard with Bodast, who never really got off the ground.

Tim Renwick (or Benwick, as Bruce and Beat Instrumental would have it) was living in the same house as Honk and Cal about a year ago, "went along for a blow" with the remains of Village (Honk, Cal and Reg Isidore - Bardens had lost heart and left), "and it worked out".... (at which point John Curd suggested a name change). He'd come to London from Cambridge and played in Jackie Lomax's 'Sour Milk Sea' era band, which managed about 6 gigs; "it was a complete disaster musically - everyone was from a different background and terribly mismatched.... a mixture of quarrelling jazzers, rockers and nostalgic Liverpudlians". As soon as Apple cut off the bread supply and forced the band to stand on its own financial feet, it collapsed in a heap, whereupon Tim shot off to work his balls off in the dying throes of Junior's Eyes. Gigs, particularly on the Continent, were abundant, but things were slowly disintegrating musically!We decided to call it a day and split up". So then Tim had two months of trapsing round doing auditions for the 4 Spots, Beryl and the Goat Jugglers, etc and eventually he joined Cal and Honk.

Quiver set out with enthusiasm (see their picture in ZZ13), but soon they "discovered that the rhythm section just didn't seem to be happening at all - and we concluded it must be Reg's (the drummer) fault". So he left, but the problems were only magnified. A suitable drummer could not be found, and vast amounts of them passed through the band until Timi Donald from White Trash arrived. He was perfect musically, but his loyalty, which he thought lay with Trash, precluded his permanent joining; anyway, he agreed to stay until they could find an appropriate replacement. "We still felt that the rhythm section wasn't really happening and, though Timi was too polite to say anything about it at the time, it dawned on us that Honk was not quite right.... and he felt the same and split". (A genuine case of amicable departure - they're still big mates, and he even lent Bruce his gear when he replaced him).

The dearth of drummers made itself more and more apparent as Timi's stay extended itself longer and longer, but he gave the middle of December as his deadline - he had decided to go back with the reforming Trash. Well, the only drummer they knew with the right feel for their music was Willie, and he was with Cochise. "We tried to get Willie before, but it leaked to his management and he got pressured into staying". This time he joined, and the group was able to start tightening up and really getting down to work. Cal's prolific songwriting had caused a pile up of unrehearsed numbers because they hadn't thought it particularly useful to work on too much material until they became a permanent unit. Which they now are. 4 quarters making a sound, and not 4 individuals freaking off.... "it's not just down to proficiency", says Bruce, "it also has to do with a state of mind; to step down and play together". And off they go, the vanguard of the "soft country funk rock" pioneers.

Timi told me why he stayed with them so long:"I wouldn't like to have seen a band which was more together on a bread and business level get onto Quiver's music and roll them out. Not that it was likely, because not many bands are competent enough or sufficiently integrated to play that kind of thing".

Still on the motorway.... past the smoke clouds of Sheffield, looking for all the world like a town-planning photograph depicting the erratic sprawl of 19th Century industrial Britain. And finally, the Huddersfield turn-off, and everyone starts waking up..... "a ripple for Dave" and they all clap and start talking..... stories of a legendary roadie acquaintance who used to get 102 out of his Tranny, and who pinched some amps as back pay when he got sacked.

The gig is at a college which occupies several floors over a department store in the centre of town and while Dave is setting up the gear - a relatively undemanding task physically, because it's mostly little compact Fender stuff - the group sits around in the 'dressing room' tuning up and chatting before their hour set. No one seems at all perturbed that we've arrived so late because the event is planned to last most of the night, another band is playing, and most of the audience seems to be totally pissed already.

Quiver's set is built around about a dozen numbers - they drop one or two according to the time they're allowed - and most of them.... no, all of them are beautiful songs, and catchy too. I made a dreadfully lo-fi bootleg recording of their set and after a few plays, I was humming all the tunes - my cassette didn't pick up the words, what with the background noise, the echo and what have you.

It was originally planned to release 'The Ballad of Barnes County'/'Gone in the morning with the sun' as a single, but I feel that several of the other numbers would be more suitable..... 'Pearly Waters' 'Glad I came around' or 'I'm so glad to be back on the road again' for example. But it now seems that these two tracks, recorded for Head Records (and all they've cut so far) will be shelved, since they are just about to go into the studio to record their first album, which they will probably produce themselves. And I'm sure it'll be a very powerful debut. Due to various reasons beyond their (and logic's) control they've had to seek another manager (some day the laws will change), which in a way is very sad because I always thought that John Curd was a thoroughly good bloke, both as a person and a manager; but now they've signed with Steve O'Rourke, the Floyd's manager, so they should be OK. He's currently seducing vast offers from record companies, and whichever label gets them in the end will undoubtedly get their money's worth. An ace band.

The gig went off well, despite a lot of the audience remaining in the bar to consume the maximum amount of alcohol before the bar shut. Then gear was packed, bread was paid, musicians and I climbed back into the truck.... off to the first M1 transport cafe with all haste. There we ate nutritious food (it's wonderful what they can do with plastic) alongside lorry drivers, the odd prostitute, and other nocturnal beings.... just like a scene out of Z Cars. It was more usual for bands to eat like this, further up the motorway these days, I was informed, "but a lot of the old groups, like Keef Hartley, still use the Blue Boar". Got to admit I've tasted worse food, but man alive was I knackered.

Back on the road again, where I promptly fell asleep for about 100 miles. I've still got backache from that bloody van, but I suppose I'd get used to it after a while.

What can I say? Except maybe:
"Go see Quiver, silly fool;
Make you shiver, make you drool". Pete

Talking with Martin Carthy of STEELEYE SPAN

(incorporating a beginners' guide to folk music)

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

These days, when an artiste or group decides that their music has become more than just a hobby and it is time to sign with a Tin Pan Alley manager, turn professional and get ready to dent the charts, a publicist is hired to thrust their name into print. Now, these publicists have become so profuse and persuasive that the pop press is always full of articles they have been hyped or asked to do by such pushers, and it has become imperative to employ the services of these people unless you want your work to go unnoticed.

Thus, when a group like Steeleye Span comes along, realising that by the very nature of their profession they are part of the big-show-biz-thing whether they like it or not, they take the advice of their manager and hire a publicist, who will verbally attack, threaten, terrorize, plead or bribe writers so that ultimately the nation, nourished by ever increasing printed praise, will resound to the screaming Melody Maker headline "SUPERSONIC STEEL EYE...ELVIS DIOS MADDY".

Right, now there are about half a dozen British groups that I would tremble to interview on the grounds that I hold them in such reverence and awe, and Steeleye Span is one of them. The various constituents of the group, one instinctively feels, are not in the least bit interested in having loads of incompetent bullshit and hype written about them - they just want to get on with their music in their own sweet way.

Tony Brainsby is a publicist. He's a nice cat, he does his work with just the right amount of ollyness, just the right amount of applomb, and just the right amount of bonhommie. Every month or so he comes on the phone to enquire whether we feel inclined to interview Fred Wilks & the Spoons, the Big Orange Chrome Mind Excursion, Willie & the Sack, and a whole string of other chart topping grist.... and occasionally we allow our arms to be twisted and write about one of his bunch, but only if we dig the music. Anyway, good old Tony knew of our keen interest in the work of Steeleye Span and in view of my trepidation, invented what I consider to be a preposterous (but clever too, mate) piece of scheming. The group, he assured me, were desperate to be featured in the pages of Zigzag (a likely bloody tale), and he wanted to fix a day of interviews with us and lesser periodicals (are there any?) participating, but based around whatever time and date Zigzag could make it. Well, I fixed a date and agreed to go along, knowing full well that he'd probably picked a day when the group was in the recording studios or something ("Oh shit man, have we got to break off from this masterpiece just to go and answer a load of banal questions from that berk?" or words to that effect).

Well, I got to the good Mr Brainsby's residence as arranged, but, as expected, failed to notice any throngs of journalists milling around, deep in conversation with Steeleye Spanners. But presently Martin Carthy arrived by minicab, didn't seem unduly choked off by being dragged over to Knightsbridge, and we chatted amiably about the group and folk music in general for about two hours. Right, having longwindedly exposed the world of the publicist (and my phoebias as well), we'll begin.

PART TWO: THE HISTORICAL INTRICACIES OF STEELEYE SPAN

When I first heard about it, the partial disintegration of Fairport Convention aroused in me the most serious misgivings - 'Mattie Groves' from Liege & Lief was my favourite track of 1969 and I don't think it was surpassed in 1970 - but not only did Fairport recover admirably, Steeleye Span grew, if shakily at first, into an excellent group. Their development is, I think, sufficiently complicated to warrant some explanation:

Tyger Hutchins left the Fairports in November 1969, and originally planned to extend the remains of the Irish traditional/contemporary folk trio Sweeney's Men, which would now consist of Tyger, Johnny Moynihan and Terry Woods. Shortly afterwards, the trio was augmented by Andy Irvine (who had previously been with and left Sweeney's Men) and Terry Woods' wife Gay. By the end of December the group had split and reformed as Steeleye Span (the name, suggested by Martin Carthy, of the waggoner in the Percy Granger song 'Horkston Grange!), with Tyger, Terry, Gay, and Tim Hart and Maddy Prior, and in this form they recorded their RCA album in the early part of last year.

"They were in the studios for a solid week, working 14 hours a day to complete the album, and what with the strain and pressures they virtually exploded and split up". When they reformed, Martin Carthy came in to replace Terry and Gay Woods (in April 70), and Peter Knight joined (in June) shortly before their first radio broadcast. After about five months rehearsal, the group began to do live gigs in September 1970.

PART THREE: THE INTERVIEW

(This is fairly lengthy because it's designed to introduce readers to various aspects of folk music as well as the group).

Z: I imagine that the change from acoustic to electric music and the differences between folk club and rock club environments were the things which struck you when you joined the group. Right?

Martin Carthy: Well, that's part of the reason why it took so long before we did any live gigs - Tyger was the only one who knew anything about electric music really. I had a bit of trouble making the transition to electric guitar .... the techniques are different, but I don't really think about it now. If I'm out for a week doing solo gigs, I have to really think about my playing the first night I'm back with the group .... you tend to slither a bit.... you have to be gentler.

Z: The fact that the left hand too can produce a lot of sound through amplification - things like that do you mean?

M: Well I've always done that anyway.... I'd say that most of the work I do on acoustic guitar is done with the left hand - hammering on, flicking the string with the finger that's fretting it (so it's played twice). Obviously my acoustic style has been developing over the years, and the stuff I'm doing now is comparatively new, but the change to electric isn't really that difficult.

Z: What about the venues - they must be considerably larger and the amount of extraneous noise can hardly compare with a folk club atmosphere.

M: Well generally speaking our audiences are quiet and receptive, but the size of places does tend to overawe me sometimes. We did one gig at Ewell Tech in this enormous barn of a place, and we all fell to pieces in the end.... we haven't had a gig as bad as that one since. But we're still very much feeling our way, but getting tighter and tighter all the time.

Z: We never went through a folk-rock period like they did in America - until the Fairports, the only English folk-rock record I can think of is the Animals' 'House of the Rising Sun', and that's an American song.... though the Byrds did a few British traditional songs on their earlier albums. But there doesn't seem to be much antagonism from folk purists about this wave of electrified folk, does there?

M: No - the thing is, that a lot of the so-called purists in England have always been interested in the possibilities of combining folk music with electric instruments. AL Lloyd, for instance, has been hung up on those ideas for a long time, and he went to see the Fairports do their first gig with Dave Swarbrick and was knocked out by some of the stuff they did.... and he's looked upon as the big white chief.

Z: In the early stages, Tyger was worried

about finding a drummer. Are you no longer seeking one?

M: We have some percussion - Maddy plays spoons and tambourine for instance - but from joining the group, I've been the one who said "no I don't think we need a drummer"; and Tyger sometimes agreed but other times he thought we did. We thought we needed one from the time-keeping point of view, because it's easy to lose time, but as far as I'm concerned, the type of music we're doing doesn't lend itself to a drummer. Drums were used on the first album, but we're not using any on the new one.

Z: What songs are ready for that so far? (This interview was done before Christmas, and the album has been completed since then)

M: So far we've done an instrumental track of a couple of Irish jigs, 'The female drummer', 'Cold, haily, windy night', 'The false knight on the road' and 'The lark in the morning'. They turned out quite well - I didn't take part in the mix, but Tyger and Tim came home very pleased with things.

Z: Do you take an active part in the production?

M: Well I was going to go to the mix, but I was too clapped out. Sandy (Roberton, their manager) is the one who does it all really; he knows how to do it, and Tyger and Tim sit in on the mix to make suggestions. But Tim reckons that Sandy's a really good mixer.

Z: Do you feel, from response and so on, that traditional music is reaching and making an impression on a wider audience these days?

M: Well I've never thought of myself as a crusader, but yes, it's bound to happen... it's being spread out a bit more. As you say, people like the Byrds were doing it, and Bob Dylan has been doing it for years. So many of his tunes are traditional Irish, Scottish and English tunes.

Z: Even to the extent that you get mentioned on his second album sleeve! That Bob Dylan song you do now - 'Lay down your weary tune' - did you get that from the Byrds LP?

M: Tyger knew it, but that may have been where he heard it because he's an avid Byrds fan, but he has another recording of it too, I think.

Z: That has a British tune, doesn't it?

M: It sounds British, yes, but as I said, he came over here in 1962 and went back with his head absolutely full of British tunes - and over the next few years, out they all came in his songs. But Tyger has always been into a lot of the lesser known Dylan songs.

Z: So your music is essentially British, despite a couple of American lyrics in your repertoire?

M: Yes. Tyger's great thing is a 'British Rock Music', based on British, rather than American, form. I mean, when you think of modern American music, you think of a group like the Band; but to my mind, the Fairport is just about the only group that plays British music.

Z: Can you get more specific in your definition of form?

M: It's one of those intangible things really - but something like the Band couldn't be anything else than American, and the Fairport playing, say, 'Sloth' is very definitely British.

Z: But isn't it possible to thrust a very basic American song into a British form - like you do with 'Rave On' for instance?

M: Well that wasn't thrust into a British form - we were just singing it in the car and it sounded nice. The way it comes out when we sing it sounds terribly British, but there was no feeling of "let's take this song and make it sound British, chaps.... striped trousers on".

Z: What distances are there between your harmonies? I mean, are your arrangements concisely worked out on manuscripts, or are they done by ear and result from a natural feeling for the music?

M: As far as I'm concerned, it's all down to feel - my theory of music isn't really too advanced. But Tyger and I were talking about this the other day, and we reckoned that people like the Byrds and the Burritos can just play. We went to see the Burritos at the Lyceum, and they covered an enormous field, yet British bands still have this desire to specialise - you know, heavy, blues, etc. And I get the feeling that they latch onto one type of American music and really work to get into it, so they end up playing very influenced blues based rock, or what have you. But Americans just play it - it's part of them and it's not difficult. So you had the Burritos coming on stage and doing some really sloshy country songs, then playing some really nice bluegrass on acoustic instruments, then some rock, and so on.... and they were really excellent. There was no effort involved - they just did the music. British bands specialise much too much, and only end up, to my mind, being too intense and over involved. Music is something you do.

Z: One of the things I liked about your act was the way Tyger introduced each song and offered brief explanations of broadsides, origins of songs, bits of folk lore and so on. Supposing that this and your music encouraged members of the audience (who had probably previously thought that folk music was stuffy and dull) to want to delve into the subject a bit, are there any books you could recommend?

M: Well it's really a question of listening rather than reading - listen and listen and listen and listen, in clubs and to records. That means you have to wade through an awful lot of rubbish to get something you want, and then when you wade through it again you find it wasn't all rubbish, and when you go through it a third time you realise that it's even less rubbish. Folk music is, I suppose, very much of an acquired taste - though if the bug bites you, then it really does bite you.

Z: The oral tradition, the passing of the music from generation to generation; does it still exist at all, or has television, the press and wider education killed it all?

M: No, it still exists here and there. If you go into some of the remote parts of Scotland and Ireland for instance, it's incredibly alive.

Z: Is it more or less confined to geographical areas, or just within families and very small communities?

M: Both really, and you still find odd people who know stacks and stacks of songs that they've learned from other people, songs that have been passed down. A few years ago, an American called Kenneth Goldstein came over and visited a family called the Stewarts. One of them, Lucy Stewart, was very old, and it took him ages to coax her to sing. In fact, hardly anyone in the town they lived in, or even in her family, knew that she sang - and yet she started coming out with these songs - Goldstein got about 200 songs from the family, including about 80 from her. And they were all really nice versions of various ballads with lovely tunes.

Z: Could you talk a bit about these broadsheets that were sold on the streets?

M: Well, they were a sort of early Tin Pan Alley - selling sheet music for a penny a time. At the hangings, for instance, there was this big business; the writers would come from the broadsheet "factory" to the prison where twenty guys were going to be publicly hanged the next day, and the jailer would tell them the stories of each. Then they'd rush back and write ballads about them, print them up, and sell them as the guys were being hanged.

Z: Selling postcards of the hanging. Was it just a commercial racket then, because I thought that broadsheets were a product of love, care, woodcarving craft and so on. I thought it was a sort of art form.

Woodcut from the orginal broadside sheet of "Death of Major Andre."

M: Oh there was a lot of that too. But one of the printers, a guy called Catnash (is that spelt properly?), who operated from the Seven Dials area of London, had a million seller on his hands at one time, so there was a lot of money being made out of them too.

Z: Did they die out when newspapers came?

M: No, not entirely. Ewan McColl says that he was sold one on the street the day after the Sugar Ray Robinson/Randolph Turpin fight, and he kicked it around a bit and put it on record. There's a guy called John Foreman who still makes them - he's

part of the folk scene, and calls himself the Broadsheet King.

Z: What about folk clubs? Are they still proliferating, or are the good old tradition -al strongholds the only ones which keep going?

M: Oh no, there are new ones starting up all the time. It sort of goes in waves.

Z: Are the audiences primarily students, because they were when we ran ours back in 1965.

M: Well you usually find that the students have their own club at the local college, and that the town club is mainly ordinary townspeople - which is why Tim and Maddy and I are still doing the clubs. If we spent our lives just singing to students.....well it's such an unreal existence, because students are all 18 -21 - they never grow up. There's a club in Birtley which is mainly miners for instance - that was set up by the Elliot family, and they knew some fantastic songs.

Z: Can we talk a bit about ballads? There are a lot of lines, situations, adjectives, etc that are common to a lot of ballads, aren't there?

M: Yes - that's all part of the tradition - the broadside ballads often had a form like "I was brought up in such and such a town, but not of high decree, my parents treated me well or badly, they apprenticed me to a so and so, at the age of 16 I went to such and such " and so on. Some of the best ballads are those with the most repetition in them - 'Long Lankin' for instance is over 20 verses long and is mostly repetition:

"Said my lord to my lady as he mounted his horse
Beware of Long Lankin that lives in the moss
Said my lord to my lady as he went on his way
Beware of Long Lankin that lives in the hay
See the doors are all bolted, see the windows are pinned
And leave not a crack for a mouse to creep in
Oh the doors are all bolted, the windows are pinned
But etc" and it goes on repeating, and you get a fantastic effect from that.

Z: Ballads obviously change as they are passed from person to person, but it seems that some people radically altered them on purpose.

M: Well the balladmaker had a story from which to write his verses, and through time, bits got put in and, yes, stories got changed quite unashamedly and facts got altered. For instance, the name of the band, Steeleye Span, comes from a song about 100 -150 years old. There's this place called Horkston Grange up in Lincolnshire; the foreman there was a man called John Bolin, and there was a wagoner called John Steeleye Span worked there too... and both men obviously hated each other's guts. They eventually had an enormous punch-up and the whole thing is commemorated in the ballad. Well the song has got changed somewhere along the line so that Steeleye Span is now a miser, and John Bolin is his foreman. In the song, Span takes every opportunity to shit on Bolin, who eventually loses his cool and hangs one on him. Then Span, instead of belting him back, takes revenge through the courts. So it's been completely altered.

Z: Who by?

M: People - by singers. And that's now the accepted version.

Z: So how did you find the true story out?

M: It was in a book of old Lincolnshire folk songs, and in the notes it gave the full story of what really happened.

Z: I read some scholarly cat who reckoned that the accuracy of events weren't important anyway, as long as the action was maintained - but I thought the whole point of a ballad was to put a specific event into song.

M: Well either that, or to perpetrate some kind of moral or lesson. Something happens and a song gets written about it in a

PETER/MADDY/TYGER/MARTIN/TIM

sort of parable form, though a lot of these ballads are based on stories without any factual basis - just stories made up by people.

Z: I was reading an old article by Ewan McColl who reckoned that the entertainer was required to put himself over to the audience, but the traditional singer was concerned only in putting over the song. Being in a showbiz context as Steeleye Span is, where does the group stand with reference to those ideas?

M: As far as I'm concerned, we're putting the song over - and I think what he's saying is true. For instance, when you're singing a ballad, you cut yourself off completely and focus your attention on the song itself, and something happens..... you've alienated yourself in a way, but something happens - the people are there, and they make a difference as to whether you do it badly or whether you do it well. With a group it's very difficult.

Z: A lot of your act seemed to be on an entertainment level, but it was the audience rather than the group which dictated that. They enjoyed the music as a whole, but didn't really fully appreciate the songs indivdually.

M: Yes, well that's a problem - especially when you're working with volume. But we're aware of this and I suppose it's one of the reasons that we're continuing to work as solos - because you maintain that sort of contact. When you're working on your own, you can get really stuck into the music and get on top of it, but when you've got 5 people all contributing, it can sometimes be very difficult.

Z: How about interpretation of folk songs - do you tend to sing the songs the same way each night?

M: Well no matter how well you know a song, there's still an amazing amount of spontenaity can go into its interpretation - and sometimes you know you've done it very well - there's a spark there which tells you. On the face of it, one interpretation is hardly different from the next but it's down to timing of tiny little areas, or one word even.

Z: I can appreciate a personal satisfaction when you know you've done a song well but can the audience really notice such detail?

M: Sometimes yes. I think on the folk scene exclusively, you get audiences that have to put themselves out a bit and concentrate....more than any other musical field. They have to follow words and music, get the point of a pause, follow the thread of a story and so on.

Z: We were talking the other night, and we reckoned that the rock scene has got to the point where most of the audience

prefers their opinion to be formed for them. There's a hell of a load of pretension about the way music affects them, which I would have thought is a danger of a group like you going into the electric field and becoming part of it.

M: Right - and I'm sure I don't know what to do about it. That's yet another reason why I'm keeping a foot in the folk clubs. A lot of people slag folk music and say it's dull and so on, but there are a great many pieces of gold in a folk audience and you have that contact. I mean, I don't specialise in chorus songs or anything, but I really love to hear a roomful of people all singing out.

Z: Do you think today's folk audiences identify with the songs like they used to?

M: I don't see why they shouldn't - people haven't changed that much....emotionally they're the same and probably always will be.

Z: Folk music owes a lot to Cecil Sharpe and his song collecting work in the early half of this century. I read from one source how he discovered folk music when he threw open his window on Boxing Day morning in 1899 and heard a concertina in the street below, and how that prompted him to take an interest in the subject. Is that just a bit of over-romanticised nonsense?

M: Well the accepted story is that he was aware of the existence of folk music, but was staying at a friend's house somewhere in Somerset - and he was in the lounge or conservatory and heard the gardener singing - so he stuck his ear to the window and listened to the song, which was called 'The Seeds of Love'. Anyway, he couldn't believe it, and rushed out and took the song down, arranged it on the spot, and had someone come in and sing it at a sort of soiree. The gardener was invited, but didn't like what these gentry had done to his song. And Sharpe went on to become the first really thorough collector, though others had attempted to cover various areas of Britain. He collected thousands of songs in England, and thousands more in America, because he had this theory that there must have been versions of the songs taken over to America by the pioneers.

Z: When Child was collecting his songs in America in the 1850s, he reckoned that folk music was dead and he was sort of embalming the corpse with his work, didn't he?

M: Yes, there were a lot of people who said "when this lot of singers die, folk music will die with them", and there are still people saying that today. You know, they think about these guys walking behind ploughs in the fields of Sussex, singing their old songs as they work, are the last remaining carriers of the music.

Z: Hey, I wonder if any of the old farmers out our way know any ancient Buckinghamshire folk songs?

M: Oh yeah, they are sure to.....but you can't just walk up to them and say "here, sing me 85 songs". There was this Danish guy I met up in Edinburgh, who had been given a grant by the Danish Folklore Archives to research into the origins of music and was up in the Hebrides recording these waulking songs, which the locals sang as they were waulking the tweed.... they had this long trestle table and this great length of tweed, with a row of women. Then they'd soak the cloth in sheep's piss and bash it, to shrink it. Now, co-ordination was necessary to do this properly, so they sang to get a sort of rhythm going. Well, all this primitive work stopped about 40 years ago, but this guy went up there and found an old waulking team, all in their 80s, and he got them together and chatted to them for weeks and weeks until he gained their confidence enough to be able to record them singing all these old songs. And you should hear it - really beautiful.

Z: I feel that some of your rival groups, the ones working in the same musical area as you, don't seem to know their subject enough - their roots aren't deep enough. Do you think that's important?

M: Well it's essential. I mean, I could hardly go and form a blues band....I love blues, but I really don't know the first thing about it. There are a lot of groups with excellent musicians, but it would make such a difference if they had a more solid grounding too. Look at some of the American bands....the Burritos for instance - they come on with all this country stuff, but they can also play all the music it developed from - they can play old tunes like 'The Clinch Mountain Backstep' which is an old modal tune. They know their stuff, and it makes a difference. Pete

Right, go and listen to Steeleye Span, dig out some nice folky LPs, read 'Folk Song in England' by A.L. Lloyd (Panther), go and investigate Cecil Sharpe House near London Zoo, sniff around in Collets Folk Record shop in New Oxford Street and peruse the magazine rack and chat to the cat behind the counter, and discover that folk music really is a gas after all.

"no comment"

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Steve Peacock - Sounds.

DANDELION

THE INSECTS OF SOMEONE ELSE'S THOUGHTS

LOU REED, & THE VELVET UNDERGROUND

Eyes, in New York, betray, or reveal, more of a person than anywhere I've been in Europe. In the subways, most people avert any gaze, or else their eyes flicker and judder, subjects of pain and pressure. It's commonplace to meet professionally successful people who, as they talk, seem to focus on a point six feet beyond your head. And then there are the people whose spirit seems to have gone to lunch. They have the eyes of fish. They have abandoned the pretence of contact.

I had this in mind at the Electric Circus, December 30, watching Little Richard after 15 years of listening to his records, wondering how he came across. He wears black make-up on his lips and around his eyes, to intensify his stare. He flashed a glance, as he sang, at pretty much everyone in the audience. And his eyes said: am I not a star? The star? And the audience, partly phased out by sleeplessness, partly by his gall, nevertheless said: amen. He'd found his way of staying alive.

Lou Reed, too. You've only to listen to Velvet Underground albums to know what's been in his mind, these last years. I met him in Danny Fields' office, at Atlantic Records, on Broadway at 60th. And as he spoke, I was continually drawn to his eyes. They've as steady a gaze as those of anyone I've met. And they reveal the intensity, and the courtesy, that the eyes of the very best journalists have; the journalists who have the ability to see and hear anything, however painful, and yet make sense of it.

I'd written an article which proposed that the extreme terror and violence of Velvet Underground songs derived, not from imagination, but from his journalist's ability to mirror what there was – and is – to see in New York. I showed it to him tentatively. He read it and put it down, and looked at me, and said 'how did you know?' Most rock music writers go into their heads to create songs. In the old days, Lou carried a notebook everywhere. Years ago, he rented a £29 a month room on Ludlow Street. He and John Cale listened to the Who, and said to each other: that's it. And decided to put content into their songs, so that people listening would start up (and Lou mimed the reaction, hand to ear) and say 'What's that? Did you hear that?' That was what was on Lou's mind, when he wrote 'Heroin' and 'The Black Angel's death song' and 'I'll be your mirror' for the first Velvet's album. The last song, he said, is the key to the album.

And he sang the words that Nico sings, on that album:

"I'll be your mirror
Reflect what you are
In case you don't know".

He wanted to make a connection on that album, he said, so that kids with blasted minds could lift their confusion into the music. So that the music could feel their pain.

Did it work like that, with songs like 'Heroin', I asked? Isn't it true that kids came up to you after Velvet's performances, and asked you where they could get heroin? More than that, Lou said, kids would say: hey, I shot up to your song. Hey, I nearly OD'd on that song. (Kids of 13 or 14). 'Heroin' was never a song I cared to sing too often, Lou said. Audiences would always ask for it; even this summer, when the Velvets played each night at Max's Kansas City, in Chelsea (NY). Maybe the kids did feel a connection with the song, which lifted off their sense of isolation. Maybe. There's a repeated line in 'Heroin':

"I guess
I just don't know
And I guess
I just don't know"

Who knows? There are now reckoned to be 50,000 people in New York with a dependence on heroin. Mayn't they have a song of their own?

Listen, Lou said: I was never a heroin addict. He paused. I had a toe in that situation, he said. Enough to see the tunnel. The tunnel downwards? I asked. The vortex, yes, he answered. 'Heroin' isn't an up song, he said. But I think he knew that that statement wasn't true. 'Heroin' is neither, of itself, up or down. It's desciptive. A mirror. People will make of it what they will. At least it's illumination.

Lou's notebook. In those days, he said, people he hung around with, had a thing about magic markers. They'd sit about, looking to make pictures of their dreams with magic markers. And Lou would sit outside them with his notebook. They assumed he was making magic markings. In fact, he said, I was writing down all these weird things that people were saying. Being a journalist of the everyday situation of people in extreme circumstances. Or, rather, of people in an extreme city, who were, in their vulnerability, experiencing its extremity. Because they had no means to make a connection with its luxuries. Who were (and are) threatened with the dissolution of their minds, by what Lou called 'the jimjams of this town'. People who were open wounds.

To be a writer, and to be a censor: those are two different occupations. A writer should reveal what he sees, hears, feels. Sometimes a writer has an obligation to be reckless. Unchronicled, misfortunes fester. But at the same time, Lou had no reckoning of himself as a doctor, lancing moral boils.

He spoke, at some length, of Ray Davies as a writer he felt some affinity with. In obvious respects, the Velvets and the Kinks are not alike. The music of the Kinks is a spare, unadventurous vehicle for Ray. The Velvet's music, on the other hand, is crucial to Lou, and John Cale, musically, at least matched Lou's writing ability. All the same, there are connections. Lou said his idea was always to make each Velvets album a book; each song a little play. Books, films, records: he happened to choose records as a vehicle. So that kids could, listening, get that shock of recognition. 'Wow, did you hear what that man is singing?' To steal their unaware consciousness.

Lou told a story about a girl called Alaska. (Alaska? That's right). There was this story from England, Lou said, about a girl whose brain exploded from amphetamine. When the surgeon opened her head, for the autopsy, the brain was all – all scribed, as if by those rows of needles that record your physical functions in laboratories. Lou said that Alaska was like that. He wrote a song about her, which he never recorded, called 'Stephanie Says', which revealed the secret of Alaska's name. She was cold through and through. The material for the song is in Lou's notebook. He thought of publishing it once, he said, but those crazy days are passed, now.

Compare Lou's songs with Ray Davies' songs like 'Do you remember Walter' and 'People take pictures of each other'. Same style, same type of mind, putting down detail, keeping off generalities. Writing about people in two very different cities; London and New York. One big difference: Lou brings the experience of his songs closer to himself, by singing in the first or second person, narrating events as if they are happening at the time he sings them, rather than in terms of their being past. This technique, with the Velvet's music, which on the first album sustains a tingling drone, obliges the listener to find sensations in himself which correspond to the state of mind of Lou Reed's singing alter ego. It forces the listener into the events of the song, as if they are happening to him. How's this, for example, for the paranoia of the mainliner, standing at Lexington and 125 Street:

"Hey white boy, what you doin up town
Hey white boy, you chasin our women around...
Oh, pardon me, sir, it's furthest from my mind;
I'm just looking for a dear dear friend of mine..."

The dear dear friend is, of course, his connection.

The Velvets' first three albums all contained one track much longer than the rest, and therefore which set itself aside from them, and which infected the whole album with its complexity and ambiguity. The

kind of track that encourages people to say (as Lou put it): "Wow, Lou, I really liked your last album, except for (....)" On the first album, this track is 'European son (to Delmore Schwartz)'; on the second 'Sister Ray'; on the third 'Murder Mystery'. On the fourth album (Loaded) 'New Age' might have developed into such a track, but it was edited by the rest of the band after Lou had left.

At one time, I wanted to be a novelist, Lou said. But I could never sustain that number of words. We were talking about Borges: Lou was intrigued that Borges had the ability to put the thought that most novels require, into 12 pages. What I was after with tracks like these, Lou said, was to attempt my own 'Waste Land'. The way I'd put it, Lou was attempting such a work that Susan Sontag most admires: whose surface is its structure, and which resists being pulled apart and reduced to anything other than what it itself is. That sounds both vague and pretentious. How else to put it? Sontag's idea is that creative work, to succeed, should be seen in terms of having its own life. If a piece of creative work can be assimilated (by its audience or by a critic) then it is merely commentary on an existing state of seeing reality, which depends on previous perceptions, cannot be altered. But as far as he himself was concerned, Lou was having brand new perceptions.

'Murder Mystery', for example. Did you know (I said to Lou) that, for sure, people in London, Paris, Hamburg, and Munich, and places north, east, west and south, were crouching over their amps, switching from channel to channel, trying to make those words out? Oh, wow, really? said Lou. (And looked pleased). Stereo! It suddenly came on him, like magic. 'European Son' and 'Sister Ray' had developed techniques of word- and instrument-overlay. And, on 'The Gift', John Cale recites the story of Waldo's sad end on one channel (or, I should say, more clearly on one channel) while the music is on the other channel. Lou's idea, with 'Murder Mystery,' was to use words one way on one channel, another way on the other, synch them; so that listeners would find their way to listening first on one channel, then on the other, and afterwards on both. The first dialectical rock'n'roll track. Left hand speaker equals thesis, right hand speaker equals antithesis. And the synthesis is in the listener's own head. So that there is no such thing as the meaning, objectively, of 'Murder Mystery'. Its meaning, for any listener, depends where his head is at.

Not, Lou said, that it exactly worked out like that. After recording the voice tracks, he found that one spoke at twice the speed of the other, as if one were recorded at 15, one at 7½. He decided that he should proceed assuming that this difference was meaningful. More than once, as he spoke, Lou mentioned his forgetfulness and impatience. Neither of us could tell whether this was a virtue or a fault. The right line between instinct and mathematics has to be drawn arbitrarily. On the other hand, it's too easy to make a mystique of mistakes. (Bird's squeaks, and Lady Day's cracked voice, add to our sense of their tragedy, not to the quality of their music). I think Lou should have recorded both voice tracks of 'Murder Mystery' at the same speed.

Lou Reed's ambitious tracks succeed, not because they are an extended, or elegant, illustration of any listener's existing perceptual framework, but because they themselves indicate a previously undelineated perceptual framework. The songs are part of an attitude of mind, part of an idea of reality, previously unexpressed, certainly in rock'n'roll. They are not bendable towards existing ideals. They infect the mind of the listener with their immaculate structure, and work in terms of bending the listener's mind towards them. That's what's meant by their having a life of their own.

And Lou acknowledged that such a life exists independently of his own intentions. For example, we were talking about a line in 'Heroin'. Some months ago, I had spent a couple of evenings talking to John Cale. Filled with enthusiasm to be meeting a founder-member of the Velvets, I recited some of 'Heroin', saying how amazing the imagery was, corresponding as it does to a sense of impossible alienated hope:

"I wish that I was born a thousand years ago
I wish that I'd sailed the Tonkin seas
On a great big clipper ship
Going from this land into that".

No, said John. Not "Tonking". "Darkened". No, no, I said. It was definitely "Tonkin". Listen, said John, gently nettled. I stood behind Lou singing that song, hundreds of times. It's "darkened". Well, I thought to myself, I hear "Tonkin", I prefer "Tonkin", and so, as far as I'm concerned, it is "Tonkin". That quick reference to a kind of Oriental Atlantis, flavoured with a sense of Tongs, all those exotic evils kids read about in trash magazines: that's right for the song.

Meeting Lou, I mentioned all this to him. Yes, it is "darkened", he said. And, at the same time, warmed to the idea of "Tonkin". I needn't be the best poet of my own ideas, he said. And he said that listeners often improved his songs.

And also detected things in his songs, or in him, which he wasn't aware of. Another example. The first line of 'Heroin' is "I don't know just where I'm going". After a Velvets' concert one time, a kid rushed up to Lou, flashing excitement, and said: you changed the song. Why did you change the song? And Lou said: What're you talking about? And the kid said: you sang "I know just where I'm going". And Lou said: nonsense, you are mistaken. Then, later, he sang the song to himself, and discovered that the kid was right. The change in the song corresponded, Lou decided, to a change in himself which he had not up to that time acknowledged. He was beginning to see the light, rather than the tunnel. The song was singing him. That is (to say it again) the song has a life of its own.

There again, take the made-up "Chinese" phrases in 'The Black Angel's death song'. They belong in the song. In a context saturated with imagery, they cool out the song, make its texture more open; allow the listener to find his own level and his own thoughts. As with 'Sister Ray' and 'Murder Mystery', the song is a mine in which ore of a particular nature can be quarried. To go back to the beginning of this article: Lou's style strikes me as courteous. In the midst of a music which has an incandescent and relentless beat, Lou creates space. Every time Lou's long songs are played, they sound different, and can never be pinned down, because they contain a factor which varies each time they are played: the listener's mind.

Is this writing trying to be an intellectual bathyscape dive into the Velvets' music, or a fave rave? A reasonable question. I can only answer it by mentioning Constantine Radoulovitch. Aside from Lou and Danny and me, in Danny's office, and Karin Berg from WBAI, there was also Constantine. He sat on the floor of the small room, by the door, knees hunched into his chin, holding a big book. As the conversations went on, plus telephone calls in and out, he'd take surreptitious photographs. Or glance up at the poster on the wall, advertising the Velvets' summer gig at Max's. Constantine lives in Arlington, Virginia. He was very tired, having taken a day off from the record store where he works; and travelled up starting in the early morning. He was also very hungry. If only I wasn't so tired and hungry, he said, I'd be enjoying this so much more. But I am enjoying it. Constantine's book contained all the Velvets' lyrics, plus commentary; two years ago, he heard White Light, White Heat, and he's been listening to the Velvets ever since. He is 17 years old. So is Constantine's interest intellectual, or fanatical? The answer is: both. That's the way the Velvets get you. Why don't you write a thesis on the Velvets at school? I asked him. Oh, I have, he said. Thirty pages. The teacher had little enthusiasm for it, he said.

As he spoke, Lou was saying that, this last summer, he'd found less and less enthusiasm too; in his case, for continuing with the Velvets. His decision to split was influenced by Brian Jones' death, and I'd guess confirmed by the deaths of Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin. Many rock musicians have been hurt, or paralysed, by having their persons sucked up and consumed by the vortex of their personae. 'Loaded' was Lou's good-bye to the Velvets; he'd decided, in time, to become himself again. To proceed from beginning to see the light, to the beginning of a new age. He played some tapes of his new songs, and showed me a poem he'd written after seeing the film 'Little Big Man', in which he'd put himself in the head of an Indian chief feeling his people die. The poem contains the line "we are the insects of someone else's thoughts". The line works for a rock'n'roll star, too.

Do you know, Lou said, that I've only ever received three, or four, letters from Europe, about my music? We were discussing why people were scared to approach him, and why no other band ever recorded his songs. The reason is to do with the completeness of his songs. People listen to the Velvets as individuals. It's always a surprise (a pleasant surprise) to find that a friend is also a Velvets devotee, because their music never addresses people collectively. That's right, said Lou. My songs are little letters. But, alas, he said, "I never got to people playing the records, so I could cheer if they got them right".

I'd like to put on top hat and tails, Lou said, like Marlene Dietrich in 'The Blue Angel' and do a number with a high soul chorus.' And he mimed out the number, 'Lonely Saturday Night', putting in the instruments with hums, and the "aahs" and "oohs" of the chorus. "The Velvet Underground wouldn't do that" he said. We laughed. And we talked a bit about John Cale's solo album 'Vintage Violence', and about Nico.

Lou had been reading Wilde's 'De Profundis', in an edition with an introduction by W. H. Auden, and had been annoyed by Auden's assertion that Wilde's reaching for Jesus was pathetic. That's the best part, Lou said. The book bit me. And, after a long search, he was reading Dante, in the translation used by Wilde.

Danny had to go. He took Constantine to the Village for a feed. Lou walked off in the other direction, in a leather jacket, no richer than when he'd started. Off 8th Avenue, copies of the Velvets' third album were selling at $1.50 each.

GEOFFREY CANNON

Yeah, he's a sweet little rock'n'roll er, and Chuck Berry's right back with the best LP he's recorded in ages - those barren years with Mercury all swept away by his triumphant return to Chess. It's called 'Back Home', appropriately, and sneaky old Chuck, just when everybody was writing him off as a has-been, has come up with one of the greatest come-back records ever. And it must be regarded as a come-back. Chuck's reputation as one of the greatest ever rockers would have been assured, even if he had never written another song after 1958, but this record again reveals the greatness of the man and suggests that there's still an axe or two up his sleeve just waiting to be chucked.

Between 1955 and 1958 Chuck wrote between 20 and 30 classic rock'n'roll songs which shaped the direction of rock so surely that his influence is still apparent... on Dylan's 'New Morning' LP for instance, and on the jam session LP in the George Harrison set; listen to the guitar players there - not just George - and you realise how much the sound as well as the style, of rock is derived from Chuck Berry. In those three years Chuck practically wrote the history of rock'n'roll and defined the life style of young America of the late fifties... the titles alone almost tell all - a chronicle of cars/girls/romance/botheration - a crash course in urban American sociology wedded to the most affectionate and intuitive celebration of rock and roll written so far: Maybellene/Wee wee hours/Thirty Days/Roll Over Beethoven/Too much monkey business/Brown eyed handsome man/Schoolday/Oh Baby Doll/Rock'n'roll music /Sweet little sixteen/Reelin and rockin/Johnny B Goode/Around and around/Oh Carol/Sweet little rock'n'roller/Almost grown/Little Queenie/Back in the USA/Memphis Tennessee/Let it rock/Mad Lad/Jaguar and Thunderbird/Nadine/Don't take us but a few minutes/etc....a non stop hymn to the USA during the time Chuck rode the rock'n'roller coaster like the sneaky mean old champion that he is - no doubt who he was on about when he sang 'Brown eyed handsome man'. This was the era of yellow suits and blue suede shoes, slicked back hair and the sensational 'duck walk' when Chuck hopped one-legged across the stage while playing those insistent overdrive licks on his fat blonde Gibson; the era of high school hops, white sports coats and pink carnations, rock'n'roll riots and tentative sexuality in the hit parade. Chuck, all sinuous grace and eye-rolling leeriness, blasted through all the pussyfooting with his sneaky car/girl imagery which produced his original hit 'Maybellene' in 1955:

"As I was motivatin over the hill
I saw Maybellene in a Coupe de Ville,
a Cadillac a-rollin on the open road
...nothing'll outrun my V8 Ford.
The Cadillac goin bout ninety-five,
bumper to bumper, rollin side by side".

I never have seen Chuck live, but from the first choppy chords of the first track of his I ever heard, he has been my favourite all time rocker and, in my opinion, the greatest of them all. One of my most treasured musical memories is going to see 'Jazz on a summers day', the film of the Newport Jazz Festival of 1958....all the greats there at last - Thelonius Monk, Gerry Mulligan, Jack Teagarden, Mahalia Jackson, just everybody seemingly....all too much....and then..... woweeee - CHUCK BERRY..! in front of an all-star pick-up group of jazzmen - I remember Jack Teagarden among them, and they're all walking away on 'Sweet little Sixteen'.... and there's sweet old Chuck, guitar slung down by his knees, winking over his shoulder, legs like rubber, jacket off his shoulders, bounding about like Brer Rabbit, and it's unbelievable. This is revolution - the rock'n' roll rabble at the jazz Bastille - the walls are crumbling, and then he does the duck walk! Back as straight as a Southern Colonel, one leg doubled under his ass the other stuck straight out, guitar rearing out of his crotch he bounces across the stage revving mad licks from his hatred Gibson and one of the most amazing and gracefully sexy rock'n'roll acts ever has been laid on a jazz audience....and they loved it:

"They're really rockin in Boston, Pittsburg Pa,
Deep in the heart of Texas, round the Frisco
All over St Louis, down in New Orleans, [Bay,
All the cats wanna dance with
Sweet Little Sixteen".

Round about 1958, Chuck did a two week tour of Australia, "which was a drag, I mean really a drag. I never found even a hot dog". When he got back, he wrote his great pop anthem 'Back in the USA':

"Did I miss the skyscrapers?
Did I miss the long freeway
from the coast of California
to the shores of the Delaware Bay?
You can betcha life I did
till I got back in the USA".

Chuck is the first poet of rock'n'roll and, like that other great American poet Woody Guthrie, he is a patriot. Back in the thirties, Woody wrote the beautiful unofficial national anthem of America, 'This land is your land', and his song and Chuck's are unmistakeably linked:

"This land is your land, this land is my land,
From California to the New York Island,
From the Redwood forests to the Gulf Stream
This land was made for you and me". [waters,

Woody saw the great hydro-electric schemes of the New Deal era as a means of bringing economic security to the workless and homeless victims of the Depression -"Eeelectricity" was the answer, and he added a half-ironic rider "plastic, everything's gonna be made out of plastic". All this in one of his talking blues, and a theme he returned to many times, notably in 'Great Grand Coulee Dam' - a tune which Chuck Berry himself used. By the fifties America was in the middle of a boom nurtured by the Korean War and the vicious anti-communist scare promoted by Senator Joe McCarthy had effectively silenced most criticisms of The American Way Of Life - everything was made out of plastic,and rock'n'roll presented one possible outlet for the pent-up frustration of American Youth - but even the rock'n'roll riots were attributed to the work of "communist subversives". I always get the impression from Woody's writings that, although he sang the praises of the New Deal and the benefits of hydro-electric power, he did it from a sense of patriotic duty - his heart was in it but his soul was out there in the land, among the forests and the "misty glitter" of the great American rivers.

No doubt where Chuck Berry's heart lay: three or four years before the American "pop artists" began making sculptures of outsize hamburgers and chromium plated hot-dogs, he'd laid it all down in his songs.....

In 'Back in the USA':

"Lookin for a drive-in,
searchin for a corner café
where the hamburgers sizzle
on an open grill night and day,
and the juke box jumpin the crackers,
back in the USA"....

and in 'You never can tell':

"They furnished off an apartment with two rooms,
they were all by themselves,
the coolrator was jammed with TV dinner and [ginger ale.
But when Pierre found work,
the little money coming, worked well.
C'est la vie say the old folks,
it goes to show you never can tell.

They had a hi-fi phono,
boy did they let it blast....
seven hundred little records,
all rockin rhythm'n'jazz,
but when the sun went down
the tempo of the music fell.
C'est la vie say the old folks,
it goes to show you never can tell".

The tune Chuck used in 'You never can tell' was a modified version of 'Great grand Coulee Dam', and his exact observation of brand-name images is an ironic sequel to Woody Guthrie's songs of the industrialised American society of the future.

What makes Chuck's songs so memorable is his capacity for capturing the style of the times so exactly - and never is this more apparent than in his numerous car songs: in 'Nadine' he "charges through the traffic like a mounted cavalier...campaign shouting like a Southern diplomat". 'Nadine' is an amazing song, constructed like a strip cartoon with a Dick Tracey/Chuck Berry type hero chasing the elusive Nadine who drives a "coffee coloured Cadillac". Somehow Chuck's guitar always sounds like a car to me - those fade out chords imitating a souped up engine and a klaxon wail at one and the same time, and those changes from sneaky riffs to choppy chords forever changing gear as he whines out of verse into chorus. Between 'Maybellene' in 1955 and 'Nadine' (released in 1964, but possibly recorded in 1959) he wrote a number of car songs, but for sheer precision of detail his saga of pay-later car salesmanship, 'No money down', is hard to beat....

"Well mister, I want a yellow convertible
four door DeVille,
with a continental spare
and wire chrome wheels.
I want power steering
and powerful brakes.
I want a powerful motor
with jet off-take.
I want air condition,
I want automatic heat,
I want a full length bed
in my back seat.
I want short wave radio,
I want TV and a phone -
you know I gotta talk to my baby
when I'm riding home".

Hardly surprising that Chuck should write about cars in the land of Henry Ford, where material success can still be measured by the frequency and style with which you change cars. The urban bluesmen, predecessors of Chuck, used car imagery (and one of Woody's most loved songs for children is 'car car'), but no-one, with the possible exception of Bo Diddley, has to my knowledge written with greater feeling for the sound, sensation and style of cars than old Chuck. The other great negro hero of the fifties was Sugar Ray Robinson and I can never disassociate the two - maybe it's something to do with the fact that Sugar Ray had a pink Cadillac and that same flash negro-showbiz style as Chuck; both had made it and wanted the trappings to show. I remember seeing Sugar Ray signing autographs in a boulevarde cafe in Paris in 1967 - I passed by, and an hour and a half later when I came back, he was still signing, smiling and shining. I knew his face, knew he was a celebrity, just couldn't think he was a boxer - he was too handsome to be true, beautiful really, and unmarked. Sugar was still boxing and winning in his forties - Chuck is forty now, and looks like going the same way. When I saw Sugar Ray, he reminded me irresistably of Chuck and also Nat King Cole - although he was a middleweight he had the same lean grace as Chuck and the same thin moustache, the same showy rings, the same gloss. But he also had a faint 'cool' - a sort of distanced charm, even modesty, which was reminiscent of Nat King Cole. Ever since then I've thought of Chuck as Sugar Ray on guitar - a mixture of sneaky charm and aggression coupled with a certain meaness which comes out strongly in the rare interviews with Chuck that I've read. There is no false modesty about men like Sugar Ray and Chuck Berry - they are good and they know it; there's no inclination to waste time praising their competitors, none of the old Joe Louis humbleness and none of the understated presence of Richie Havens - their true successor was, I suppose, Muhamed Ali in the days when he shouted "Look at me, I'm beautiful, I'm the greatest!"

Chuck has always insisted that the two greatest influences on his singing have been Nat Cole and Frank Sinatra, though I must say I can't hear it. There has always been a certain jazz inflection in his singing and playing which may have filtered through from their styles, but if you look to his guitar influences the names are more revealing. The names he mentions are Les Paul, T Bone Walker, Charlie Christian and Carl Hoagan - who is Carl Hoagan? - but I would have thought that Jimmy Reed and Bo Diddley also had a strong influence on him. Les Paul and his wife, Mary Ford, had four gold discs in the early fifties with their multi-tracked guitar instrumentals which occasionally featured Mary Ford's singing. They did a beautiful version of the jazz standard 'How high the moon', which I still love, and their white country and western sound also influenced the Everly Brothers. (In 1958 Chuck did a multi-tracked number himself called 'Jo Jo Gunn'). Charlie Christian was a negro who was put on the line when he joined Benny Goodman's integrated jazz band, along with the drummer/xylophonist Lionel Hampton. Christian was a pioneer electric guitarist who was involved with the Bop musicians in New York in

the early forties - he had a profound influence on jazz guitar styles and you can certainly hear him in Chuck's playing. T Bone Walker was an R&B guitarist of the early fifties with a strong style and flash stage act in which he did the splits, played with his guitar over his head, behind his back, etc, and Jimmy Reed dates from the same period. Reed played guitar and harmonica, and many of his songs were used by the British R&B groups of the early sixties. Bo Diddley, an amazing player and composer who deserves an article all to himself, was at Chess Records when Berry joined them, and they have even recorded together. Like Chuck, Bo Diddley had a considerable influence on Bob Dylan's work, and his song 'Bo the mighty lumberjack', for example, is very similar to Dylan's 'Ballad of Judas Priest'.

But Chuck is no imitator. Out of all those influences, he produced the most imitated style in the history of rock'n'roll to the point where his classic guitar intros to 'Roll Over Beethoven' and 'Sweet little sixteen', etc, are practically the signature of rock. Between 1955 and 1959 he earned eight gold discs, and along with Fats Domino, who also had some influence on his vocal style, he was the most successful negro artist in terms of record sales to the white market. In 1959 however, as the initial impact of rock'n'roll was being smartened out by smoothy high school kid singers like Paul Anka, Dion, Fabian, Bobby Rydell and Bobby Vee, Chuck was arrested on a morals charge, and the golden years were over.

I remember reading in the MM that Little Richard had got religion and retired from show business, and then came the bombshell that Chuck Berry had been sentenced to prison for interfering with an under-age girl - "Rock'n'roll singer lured me to St Louis says fourteen year old". One way or another it looked as though rock'n'roll was dead. I've always been in the dark as to exactly what did happen and I'm grateful to Charlie Gillett (see ZZWanderings in No 17) for sending me some information which came from an excellent American rock writer, Michael Lydon, writing in Ramparts magazine December 1969. Chuck picked up a girl, seemingly, and installed her as a hat-check girl in his St Louis club - when he dropped her she went to the police and revealed that she was only fourteen! Since she had been a prostitute for the past year, the case does have a rather trumped up feel about it. In the event, the trial dragged on and finally Chuck was sent to prison in February 1962, and, as far as I can make out, was released early in 1964. (This fixes the date of 'Gather no moss', a film reviewed by Susan Hill in ZZ17, as 1964, not63, and certainly Chuck did a tour of England in May 1964. In one sense this makes 'Gather no moss' even more interesting to Berry fans, because this may well have been his first public appearance of any importance after coming out of prison). But while he was off the scene, things had been happening.

Between 1959 and 1964, Chuck's popularity had declined, aided no doubt by the relish with which the press accented the "rock 'n'roll = sex+depravity" angle, and there were no more gold discs. Chess were re-issuing old material and suddenly it appeared that his work was tired and out of date. And then everything began to happen again. The Beatles included 'Roll over Beethoven' on 'With the Beatles' released in 1963 - in the same year the Stones released a single of 'Come On', and the Beach Boys re-wrote 'Sweet little sixteen' as 'Surfin USA', whilst Guy Stevens and Mick Jagger sent barrages of mail to Pye begging them to put out the vast backlog of Berry material as yet unreleased here. In 1964, the pace was even hotter; the Stones first LP had 'Oh Carol' and 'Route 66', which they agreed they had learned off a Chuck Berry LP, the Kinks first LP had 'Beautiful Delilah' and 'Too much monkey business', and John Lennon summed it all up on the 'Beatles for sale' LP when he sang 'Rock'n'roll music'. It was time for another revolution.

"Don't care to hear 'em play a tango,
I'm in no mood to hear a mambo,
it's way too early for a congo,
so keep a rockin that piano...
So I can hear some of that rock'n'roll music,
any old way you choose it,
it's got a backbeat you can't lose it,
any old time you use it;
It's gotta be rock'n'roll music
if you wanna dance with me...
If you wanna dance with me".

On 'With the Beatles', the Beatles sang out exuberantly on a song called 'Little Child':
"Baby take a chance with me,
baby take a chance with me"....a tag line very similar to 'Rock'n'roll Music'. Later they revamped it and called it 'Get Back', and it then sounded even more like one of Chuck's songs, but their greatest tribute to Chuck must be 'Back in the USSR'; apart from the obvious title, they manage to parody Chuck and his plagiarists, the Beach Boys - in all, one of the Beatles' finest songs I think.

There is no doubt that all the Mersey groups, as well as the London based R&B bands, of the early sixties owed a great deal to Chuck, but they also took a lot from Little Richard, Larry Williams, Jerry Lee Lewis, Bo Diddley, and James Brown. Never mind the phoney rock 'n'roll revival of 1968 - perhaps the hustlers and conmen of the music business hadn't noticed that it had already happened in 1963. Just look at the names of British groups at that time: The Rockin Berries, Mike Berry and the Innocents, Dave Berry and the Cruisers, the Bo Street Runners, the TBones, etc. In late 63, or early 64, Dave Berry released 'Memphis Tennessee' and Pye rushed out the original Berry version first released on the A-side of the American single 'Back in the USA' - it had never been released in Britain, and in the event, both records went into the charts. It must have been round about this time that Pete Frame remembers the Swingin Blue Jeans coming to Luton..."now we'd like to do a number by Chook Berry, we think he's gear". To their great credit, the English groups made no secret of their debt to Chuck but from the one or two interviews I've read, it's apparent that he is less willing to acknowledge his debt to them - even though their homage continues. Maybe his spell in prison soured him up apiece, but a nod or two in their direction wouldn't come amiss. After all, when he came out of prison and appeared in 'Gather no moss', it must have meant something that Gerry & the Pacemakers, the Beach Boys and the Rolling Stones were all singing his songs on the same bill. Yet in the Rolling Stone interview 14 June 1969, he was asked..."Have you ever been in conversation with Mick Jagger or any of the Rolling Stones?"

"Not to my knowledge have I talked with this person of whom you spoke - Dick Jagger? The Rolling Stones....the Rolling Stones have a reflection of my music, I would not deny it. I think that's honest". Yeah, honest Chuck, but hardly graceful. Still, the Stones evidently bear no malice and their latest LP 'Get yer ya ya's out' includes 'Little Queenie' and 'Oh Carol'. And now here come the Wild Angels to lay Chuck Berry on a whole new generation of sweet little rock'n'rollers.

As a result of the resurgence of interest in Chuck's music, Chess then issued what I consider to be three of his greatest singles - 'Nadine', 'No particular place to go' and 'You never can tell' - as I remember they did fairly well in the charts here without exactly breaking any records, and it seemed the new rockers preferred the Berry influenced work of the beat groups of the time rather than the originals. I'm not sure if these songs were written and recorded after Chuck's stretch, or belong to an earlier period. 'Nadine' seems a clear attempt to recreate the same type of song as'Maybellene', and is none the worse for that:
"Oh Maybellene why can't you be true?
You've started back doing the things
you used to do"....
"Oh Nadine, honey is that you?
Every time I catch up with you
you've got something else to do".
Nadine is the perfect Chuck Berry performance - perfectly constructed story-line full of wit and invention, his voice smooth as a tuned engine and those lovely car-wail riffs backed up by a very bland tenor player. 'No particular place to go' could be new because it is backed up by an instrumental called 'Liverpool Drive', which may or may not be significant. The tune of 'Place to go' was one he'd used before on 'School day', but like Woody Guthrie, he was never afraid to use a good tune over and over again. It tells of a couple who go for a drive and pull into a layby for a swift fumble and then...
"can you imagine the way I felt,
I couldn't unfasten her safety belt".
They spend the rest of the evening doomed to flash up and down the freeways "with no particular place to go".

'You never can tell' refers back to 'Don't take us but a few minutes' (written in 1956) and 'Almost Grown' (written in 1957), but the couple in 'You never can tell' fare a lot better than their predecessors of the mid fifties. Many writers on rock hear a strong element of social protest in Chuck's songs but he seems to deny this in the Rolling Stone interview....."When you wrote songs, were you writing them because you felt like it or were you writing them to make money? Would you have written these songs even if they had not paid you any money?"

"No, I wouldn't have had the time. The commercial value in songs is the great instigator".

A phenomenon of 50's songs was a cold-hearted exploitation of an emerging teenage style/ethic which gave rise to a mild nagging of the system in the "they say we are too young but we know what love is all about - even a teenager has feelings - have you forgotten what it was like to be young" variety. Chuck was no exception, and despite his own teenage schooldays being well behind him (he was 27 in 1957), many of his songs latch onto this feeling. What singles him out from the mob is the honesty of his observation, which is evident in a number of sly and witty songs about growing up and combating the pressures of school, parents and employers. In 'Don't take us but a few minutes' he is complaining about interference in his life - even though he's in his twenties....
"If I was 23 years old, and you were 22,
I bet no-one would try to run
our life the way they do".....
and in 'Almost Grown' he is still being bothered in the classic progression of school-romance -marriage, and it's all there in the first and last verses:
"Yeah, I'm doing alright in school
they ain't never said I broke no rule,
I ain't never been in dutch,
I don't browse around too much,
Don't bother me, leave me alone,
Anyway I'm almost grown....

You know I'm still living in town
but I done married and settled down.
Now I really have a ball,
so I don't browse around at all.
Don't bother me, leave me alone.
Anyway, I'm almost grown".

If there is a consistent underlying protest in Chuck's songs it never amounts to more than a plaintive cry of "don't bother me", and this as ever is echoed by the Beatles - George's song on 'With the Beatles' is about some bother he has with a girl who's left him - he even calls it 'Don't bother me' and it has the usual guitar solo too...
"Until she's here please don't come near,
please stay away,
I'll let you know when she's come home,
Until that day don't come around,
leave me alone, don't bother me".

Maybe there was a bit of wishful thinking in 'You never can tell' - certainly Pierre and his belle were left alone - "c'est la vie" was the last thing the old folks said about Chuck Berry between 59 and 64, and they must have been bad years for him....even now it's arguable whether I should revive memories of those times. My defence for including this stuff is that if you really care for someone you accept everything about them - and legions of Chuck Berry fans have stuck with him through fire and blood. I was astounded when I saw 'Gather No Moss', how every appearance of Chuck on the stage, how every mention of his name ,brought storms of applause - and, apart from looking thinner than I remembered, it was hard to detect any signs of what had happened in the last 4 years. The new rock fans who are discovering Chuck Berry now, are hardly likely to hold his past sins and omissions against him, as the middle class whites of the late fifties did, but a little bit of his history may help us all to understand what went wrong during these bad years, and what his music means now.

CHUCK LISTENS TO PLAYBACKS OF 'BACK HOME' IN THE CHESS STUDIOS

My friends the Maslen brothers both have good stories to tell about Chuck Berry. Somehow whenever Chuck has been in England I just haven't been able to get to see him, but the Maslens have seen him several times. John recalls seeing Chuck in Nottingham in 1964, when he was backed by King Size Taylor's Dominos plus John Hawken from the Nashville Teens - Chuck was still playing a blonde Gibson (but a slimmer model than his early photos show) and was an outstanding success. Carl Perkins was on the same bill and he recalls what happened...."Never saw a man so changed - I did a tour of England with him after he got out of prison. He had been an easy going guy before, the kinda guy who'd jam in the dressing room, sit and swap licks and jokes. In England he was real cold, and distant and bitter. It wasn't just jail, it was those years of one nighters - grinding it out like that could kill a man - but I figure it was mostly jail". Some of this bitterness may have been revealed in Nottingham when John remembers the audience calling out the names of past hits for him to play, but Chuck misunderstood what was happening it seemed, and he thought they were barracking him. He got very uptight about it all, but it's possible that he was over sensitive to any suggestion of discrimination or criticism at that time.

In 1967 Chuck came over to play at one of the pop concerts promoted by Brian Epstein at the Savile Theatre in London. Dave Maslen was playing bass with Robert Hirst and the Big Taste, who were on the same bill, and he was in the wings when the safety curtain was dropped on Chuck's act. Again there were misunderstandings. What had happened was that the Chuck Berry concert had been chosen for a display of strength by the rocker underground - I don't think, until then, that many people really knew what a strong sub-culture they represented....and out they all came. Electric blue drapes, fluorescent socks, slim jims, velvet collars, roll-over shirt collars, DAs and Tony Curtis quiffs, beat-up black Vauxhalls of 55/56, big Nortons, Vincents, Bonnevilles, memories of the Ace and the Busy Bee, the Southend arterial, Gene Vincent/Eddie Cochran/Elvis Presley/Carl perkins/Little Richard/Larry Williams/The Big Bopper/Bill Haley/Fats Domino/Buddy Holly/Rick Nelson/Bo Diddley/Jerry Lee Lewis/Richie Valens and Chuck Berry. It was in 1967 that the Wild Angels formed (see ZZ 17) and immediately found an audience, and in 1968 Bill Haley visited - sounding as awful, to my ears, as he did in 1955. Maybe it was these events that inspired some twit publicity man somewhere to dream up the 'Rock revival'. But the thing is, it had never declined. One glance at the small ads in Motorcycle News, or Denson shoe ads, which for the last ten years had shown crepe soled bumpers with quilted tops, black slip-ons with chains across, hi-heeled chelsea boots with pointed toes and buckles, blue suedes, one coin in any juke-box in any rocker cafe anywhere would have demonstrated what any fifty-niner knows from birth it seems ...."Rock'n'roll is the greatest".

Well, they all turned out, determined to re-live the great days of 'Rock Around The Clock' and 'Don't knock the rock', cinema seat bashing, gang battles at the Elephant, and the "teddy boy menace". As they danced in the aisles, stood on the seats and tried to clamber onto the stage, the management got the wind-up and again Chuck misunderstood the situation sufficiently to believe that they were bringing the curtain down on his act. But he survived and returned to similar wild scenes at the Pop Proms at the Albert Hall in 1969.

Still, back to 1964/5. After those chart successes things did quieten down for Chuck and eventually, for reasons that are not clear to me, he left Chess and went to Mercury for an advance of $150 000. He stayed with Mercury from 66 to late 69 or early 70, and passed through one of the most barren phases of his career before returning from Mercury in Memphis, to Chess in Chicago. In the creative sense, at least, Chuck was 'Back Home'. But even if things had not been going well for Chuck, his influence on other writers and musicians continued unchecked - not least of all on Bob Dylan. In 1965 Dylan wrote 'Sub terranean Homesick Blues' and its debt to Chuck is undeniable.

In 1957, Chuck had written one of his most ingenious and witty songs 'Too much monkey business', and this is perhaps the fullest expression of his 'don't bother me' policy. Again he is in his old school/job/romance /marriage progression except that this time he takes considerable liberties with time scale - in the blues tradition - and also some of the content of the song is outside of his own experience; he did not serve in the army for example....
"Been to Yokohama, been fightin in the war,
army bunk, army chow, army clothes, army car,
ah, too much monkey business
for me to get involved in".
It's an incredible song with his verbal shorthand making his point with great economy; the story is told in a series of flashbacks - from work and credit pressures back to romance and marriage, forward to current and characteristic problems with the telephone.....
"telephone, something's wrong,
dime gone, will mail...
ought to sue the operator
for telling me a tale,
ah too much monkey business
for me to get involved in"....
then back to army service and forward again to a different job at the filling station....
"workin at the filling station
too many tasks -
wipe the windows, check the tyres,
check the oil, a dollar gas,
ah too much monkey business
don't want your botheration
get away from me".
All the frustration of the song is summed up in Chuck's final exasperated wail....
"don't want your botheration, get away from me".
But Chuck's wry resigned grouse, the song of a rebel without much of a cause, becomes a bitter rush of nihilism in 'Subterranean Homesick Blues'...
"Ah, get born, keep warm,
short pants, romance, learn to dance,
get dressed, get blessed,
try to be a success,
please her, please him, buy gifts,
don't steal, don't lift,
20 years of schoolin
and they put you on the day shift".
Much more anger than Chuck's....
"same thing every day,

getting up, going to school,
no need to be complaining,
my objections over-ruled,
ah, too much monkey business, etc".
Underneath all the grumbling, Chuck's hero knows that the way to beat 'em is to join 'em, and he'll come to terms with the competitive society. Dylan's anti-hero breaks all of the rules – he can't beat 'em, neither can he join 'em – there's only one way up and that's down:
"get sick, get well,
hang around an ink well,
ring bell, hard to tell
if anything is going to sell,
try hard, get barred,
get back, write braille,
get jailed, jump bail,
join the army if you fail,
look out kid, you're gonna get hit
by users, cheaters, six time losers,
hang around the theatres,
girl by the whirlpool
lookin for a new fool,
don't follow leaders,
watch the parkin meters".
Chuck sang "don't want your botheration", Dylan sang "the pump don't work cause the vandals stole the handles" – the frustration of the 50s had given way to the violence of the 60s.

That Chuck was the rock writer of the fifties is accepted by pretty well everyone, but by the early sixties it appeared that his work had little relevance to the times. The revival of interest in his work in 63/64 was brought about, I think, by an increasing interest in the roots of rock by the new audiences, and a mounting nostalgia by the old. His own records of that time managed to interest both audiences. But something went wrong at Mercury. He made 4 LPs, I think, and none of them made much impact – the only one I haven't heard is 'Chuck Berry Live at the Fillmore' (recorded 1967?), and this (backed by Steve Miller's band) is reputedly the best. The only record of this period that I own is 'Chuck Berry in Memphis', which is similar in style to the others and is really very bad. There are 11 songs – 4 by other writers, 3 oldies ('Sweet little rock'n'roller', 'Check me out' and 'Oh Baby Doll'), and the remainder are new songs. Chuck is backed by a typical Memphis soul band of stunning mediocrity, and the guitar tracks are either doubled up or else there is a second guitarist on the set. In the fifties Chuck played a fat blonde Gibson with a single cutaway (similar to the one that Carl Perkins used), then he changed to a slimmer model, and at the Savile David Masien remembers him playing a slim cherry red Gibson with double cutaways. This is a Gibson stereo with custom built pick-ups, and is the one he has been using for at least the last three years. Certainly the sound on the Memphis LP is quite different from his old records and his playing seems to have lost all its old drive and snap – maybe it was playing across that wretched soul drummer, but even his old familiar licks are played clumsily, and on the blues things his lack of ideas is almost embarrasing. Quite the worse songs are the things he didn't write, and the best are his old rock hits – but the new versions with booting tenor and trumpets lack the classic drive of the small group recordings of the fifties. Another Mercury LP, 'From Louie to Frisco', is very similar, featuring a number of blues with tenor and organ and the new songs turn out to be rehashes of old hits. Another is 'Concerto in B Goode', a dreadfully boring and drawn out set of tunes, and a final LP is a collection of re-recordings of Chuck's 'Golden Hits' in Memphis soul style! What can I say?

This was a very bad period for Chuck on record, and I just lost faith in his work, thinking his talent was exhausted. I was interested to read in Rolling Stone of his "sensational" appearances at the San Francisco Fillmore in 1967, but it appeared that again he sang all his old hits and the main appeal was nostalgia/back to roots, and his role as a creative artist was over.

Well, his return to Chess in 1970 made nonsense of all this – 'Back Home' demonstrates a mellowing of his talent and suggests that he could be a powerful influence again in the seventies. For a start-off he plays with a great little band (no personnel on sleeve) – the brass of the Mercury recordings has been replaced by some very fine harmonica, he has a funky drummer, some great rolling piano, and the recording quality is excellent. But mainly it's Chuck himself who brings it all back home. The fast rockers have a fine exhuberance and the blues and slower numbers have the relaxed drive of the man at ease with himself and sure of his talent. His guitar tone, I think, is sharp-er than on his fifties recordings – still instantly recognisable but less mannerist than before. His voice is right on – smooth and relaxed, but as insinuating as ever on a slow rocker 'Fish n chips'. This song, like many of his old ones, has a suggestion of Latin beat and his guitar work is really pretty....
"Fish n chips
a little coke and you – oh babe
honey drips
two more to go – oh babe
let's go on back
the trip will be groovy – oh babe
jump in the sack
flip your movie – oh babe".

There is hardly a taste of the fifties on the record, and although one or two songs sound reminiscent of his old ones, it's a family resemblance rather than a reworking of an old tune. His story telling is as well observed as ever and, since he has often said his stories are taken from life, the first two songs are very interesting. I doubt that these come directly from his own life, but they may be an oblique comment on his court/jail scenes of the early sixties. 'Tulane' was released also as a single in America, and 'Have mercy Judge', a slow blues, is a continuation of 'Tulane' – less a sequel – more next week's instalment. 'Tulane' is that old familiar Chuck Berry idea – a chase, and as usual he manages to get a deal of tension and wit into the story:
"Tulane and Johnny opened a 'novelty' shop
Under the counter was the cream of the crop,
Everything was clicking, business was good
til lo and behold one day an officer stood;
Johnny jumped the counter, but stumbled and fell,
Tulane made it over – Johnny belted a yell
Put it on Tulane
he caint catch up with you
Go Tulane, he aint mad enough with you".
Johnny gets arrested but he gets a message to Tulane on how to keep out of the case herself – he's nothing if not chivalrous....
"Put the cat out in the hall, rumple up the room,
Go back by your doctor, say you swallowed
some perfume,
Tell him that you need him quick, cause he may
have to testify
that you've been sick all day, and that's a
perfect alibi".
The corruption of the process of law is taken for granted....
"Go back round your father's
and get the money for the bail,
bring it down and bail me out
this rotten fuckin jail.
We gotta get a lawyer
in the grip of politics,
someone who can win the thing
and get the damn thing fixed".
There's more than a suggestion of Dylan's 'Hat-tie Carroll' in that attitude towards the law, but the style is Chuck's own.

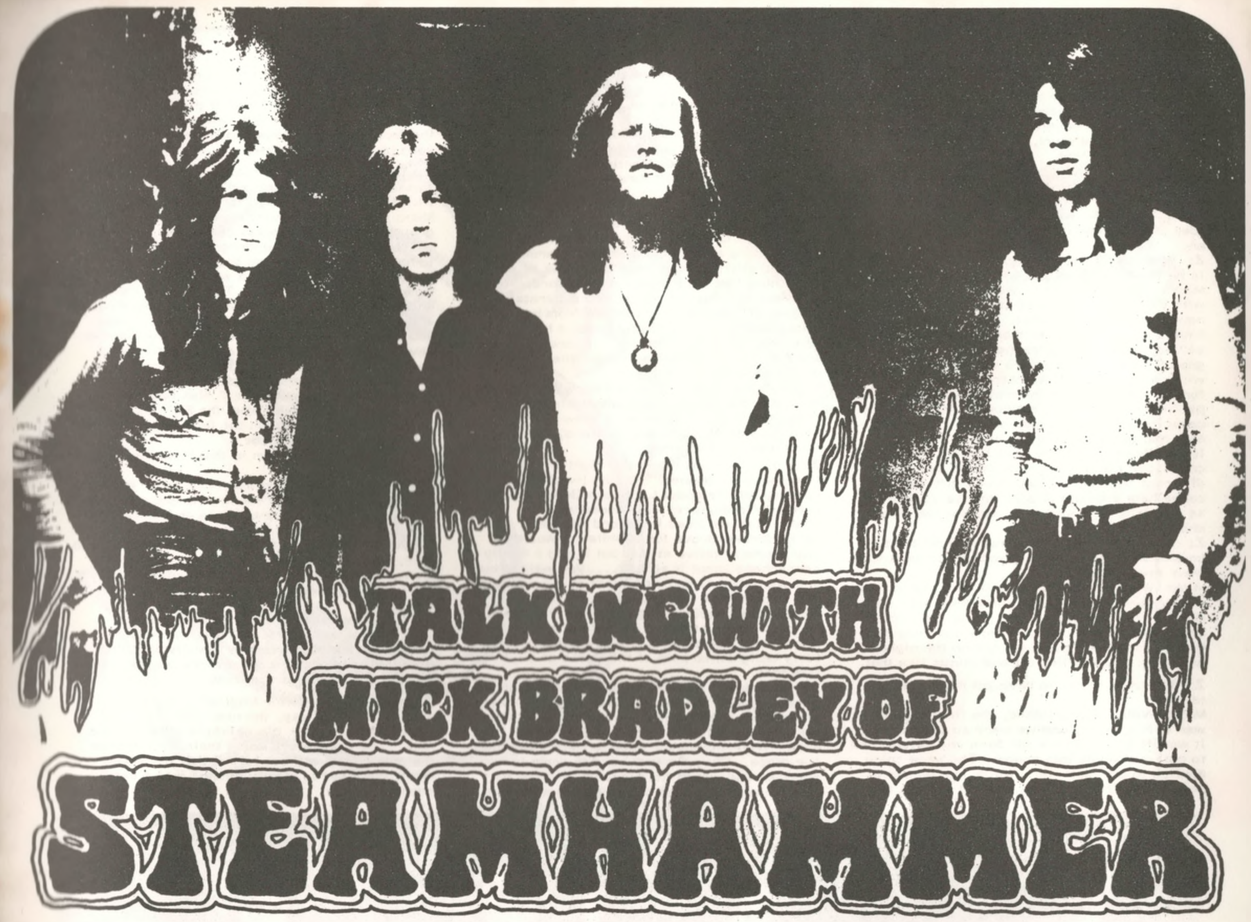
'Have mercy Judge', a fine slow rocking blues, finds Johnny in court and pleading his case. Chivalrous as ever, he has yet another message for Tulane which shows a resigned understanding of her situation....
"Have mercy on my little Tulane,
she's too alive to try and live alone
and I know her needs, and although she loves me,
She wants to try and make it
while the poor boy's gone.
Somebody try and tell her to live
and I'll understand it
and even love her more when I come back home".

The LP closes with another fine blues with a very subtle shifting beat and again reveals what a fine bluesman Chuck is. Here again, his work shows a new awareness and maturity, and he is evidently singing for the seventies in 'Some people' – in its concern for the poor and dispossessed, again he comes surprisingly close to Woody Guthrie....
"Some people live with much
and care the least
if war should end our stay
while we worthless
pay for peace
oh why should it be this way
oh the day will surely come
when we will have to live
in love and peace and happiness
and we will have the will
to love and to give
to those who do have less".

Yes, Chuck Berry is back and it's almost as if he's never been away – the LP has all the drive and excitement of the fifties but the music is for now. In many ways I think that musically it's the best thing he has ever done, and it may well be that he develops into a major blues artist. But somehow, whatever he does, I can't see him rejecting rock'n'roll altogether – as he sings on 'Back Home'....
"I'm a rocker, I'm a roller;
I may go down sometime,
but I come back to rock'n'roll".

Jeff Cloves.

As far as records go, I recommend any of the Chess (Pye here) recordings of the fifties, if you can get em, and any (1 so far) of the new Chess recordings of the seventies. Marble Arch have two fine collections of Chess stuff, with all the classic songs on them – 'Greatest Hits' and 'Chuck Berry'. There is also a fine 'Fontana Special' with five numbers by Chuck as well as stuff by Jerry Lee Lewis and Fats Domino – it's simply called Rock n Roll.
A late Happy New Year to Zigzaggers everywhere – look to the last verse of 'Some People' and mind how you go.



TALKING WITH MICK BRADLEY OF STEAMHAMMER

Z: You weren't always in Steamhammer, were you?
Mick: No – when the group formed in 1968 they had a local bloke, but he left soon after because the drummer I replaced was Mickey Waller, who had joined from Jeff Beck's old group. But he apparently didn't turn up to gigs and was generally unreliable – probably as a result of his past ...he'd been in big groups and on top sessions, and Steamhammer at that time was often travelling about 300 miles for a £50 gig. I think that he insisted on getting a minimum figure for each gig, and eventually the group had to let him go.
Z: So he went off to join Silver Metre, who seem to have zoomed into oblivion faster than any band I can think of. So where did you come from?
Mick: Well, I was once in the Sorrows...
Z: Were you on 'Take a heart'?
Mick: Yeah – and that still gets played on Radio One now and then, as a revived 45. Then I was with Methuselah; Jac Holzman happened to see us one time and he signed us to Elektra, who put out an album in America which did pretty well, but it didn't come out over here. Anyway, there was a lot of trouble and argument in the band because the singer and guitarist wanted to play other things....and when the group did break up, they became part of Amazing Blondel, so you can see how the musical styles diverged. And I joined Steamhammer....that was around the middle of 1969.

Z: Now, it seems to me that every article on Steamhammer in the pop press makes you out to be underdogs with a grudge....everything is written to explain how humble you are, how you can't make it in England, how the big time constantly evades you, and stuff like that. Why is this,...is it the line that your publicist has chosen to take or what?
Mick: Well it's really weird...you're right... it usually does turn out like that, and what's more I tend to feel that people are really influenced by and believe what they read in those papers. I've got a pet thing about the press – they tend to get into a big criticism thing, they think it's clever to criticise all the time. Our last album, which was the one we were most pleased with, and one which most people thought was pretty good, got the most terrible slagging from the Melody Maker. But as far as being underdogs is concerned, that seems ridiculous to me because we're far better off than hundreds of groups, and we're doing alright....I can't understand why they have this attitude. One or two people in the music business hold a grudge against the band, but it's for personal reasons rather than musical – like one of our managers seems to have got a couple of people's backs up for some reason, and they seem to take it out on us. For instance, one paper did a review of a concert on which we topped the bill, and they did a beautiful write up on every group except us – they didn't even mention that we were playing.
Z: So you're pretty pissed off with the press in general?
Mick: Well there's not much can do about it really, because they carry bands to the public, but if there was more honesty I'd be happier.
Z: One thing the papers do go wild over is your success on the continent. Is it really that good?
Mick: Yeah, it really is. It's all new to them and they're alive....not like this lot over here.
Z: You reckon English audiences are pretty dead then?
Mick: Well not so much dead as more blasé over here – and not surprisingly....they've seen it all for years. The point is they'll go and see groups that are on the front page of the MM, but they won't go and see groups that aren't, because there's no reason for them to. It's still a superstar thing. The thing is that the first big onslaught of English and American bands hit Germany about 18 months ago, and we got in near the start. The audiences didn't really know much about the bands because there isn't much media concerned with that sort of thing, and as a result they took every band and judged them on their music rather than other people's opinions. If they didn't like a group, they booed them off – there was no question of them liking groups because they were supposed to.

Z: You mentioned your B&C record which was released a few months ago, but how did the two CBS LPs sell?
Mick: The first one went quite well – we got a bit of recognition in the States even, but the second one died the most horrible death you could ever imagine....it was a really dreadful album anyway, due to bad hustles and vibes in the studio, lack of good material, and so on. But we'd never make an album like that again.
Z: Tell us about Steve Joliffe, that sax player who was on your second LP, because one press handout spoke of his "astonishing versatility and suitability" and another said he left because his sound was "superfluous to your rich and complex music".
Mick: Well he was the cause of great unrest really – he'd just blow all night long and blot out any solos that Martin played, and it eventually led to what I suppose you could call "internal strife". But just as we were cooking up a way of disposing of him without too much fuss, he decided to leave anyway, and we've stayed as a four piece ever since.

Z: How about Martin Quittenton, who was on the first album?
Mick: Oh, he joined for a while in 1968 and he left on the same night as Mickey Waller. He was the second guitarist then, and Kieran just used to sing, but he left to 'persue a classical career' – or, as Rod Stewart would have it,

"he's selling ice-cream at Bournemouth".

Z: Why pick B&C to release your third LP?
Mick: Oh, lots of reasons; we feel that a smaller company will handle the records with more enthusiasm for a start, and I think they're proving we're right.
Z: What about the album ('Mountains')....do you feel it's a distinct improvement on previous efforts?
Mick: Oh yes - we had better material, more idea of how to do it, better engineers and so on.
Z: What about Fritz Fryer who produced it - is he the bloke from the 4 Pennies?
Mick: Yes, that's him. We weren't too happy with the way he produced it - we're getting a new producer on the next. But we're going to have a producer rather than try to do it ourselves, because despite the fact that we're good friends, in the studio we tend to disagree with each other. Fritz hadn't been producing for very long and I think that he was trying to get his 'sound' onto the album, whether it was consciously or sub-consciously, and we probably had to sacrifice some of our character. It's difficult to explain what I mean, but his concept of the way a group should sound was different from ours - and it was difficult because he's a friend of ours and we couldn't be as pushy as we could with someone we didn't know as well.
Z: What about those live tracks from the Lyceum - what degree of sophistication went into their recording?
Mick: We used the Pye Mobile Unit, which was really good because they know their job...they did the Who and so on. We got to the Lyceum and it was all set up....it came out very well considering the trouble we had on the night with jack plugs falling off and things like that.

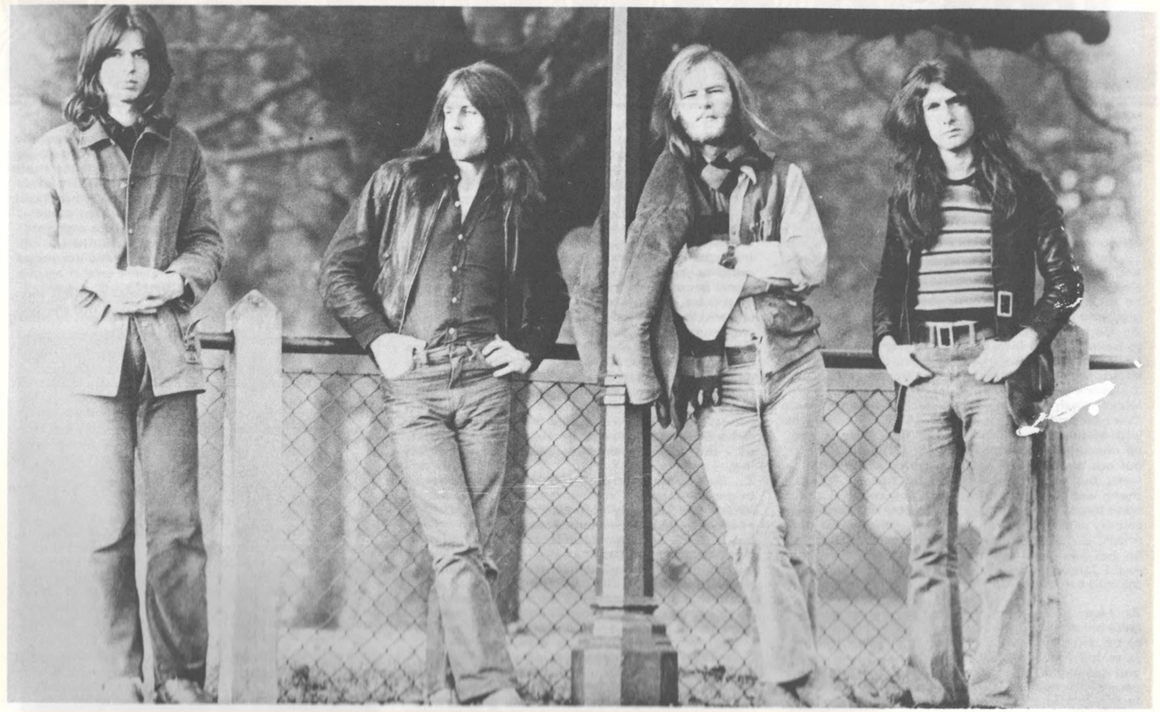
Z: The band seems to have got much tighter lately.
Mick: Well, when I joined, the first gig I did was at Richmond, and we were so untogether it wasn't true. So we sat down and determined to pull ourselves into shape. The same thing applies to our material - we do our utmost to steer away from clichés; musical clichés and lyrical clichés....we've all got this thing about avoiding them.
Z: Kieran writes most of the material; how does he go about that?
Mick: Well I think he spends most of his waking hours with a guitar and tape recorder, and two or three times a week Martin goes over to his house in Ealing to sift through it all, expanding ideas and so on.
Z: He seems to have got more lyrical of late.
Mick: Yes, there must be some influence somewhere but I can't really put my finger on it. I suppose it's an extension of our determination to avoid clichés....Kieran just tries to get to something that hasn't been done before.
Z: Whereas most of the instant superstar lot do just the reverse....a cliché from here, a cliché from there, and you've got a hit record like 'Paranoid' for example. Kieran was doing some writing with Brian Patten, the poet..... what happened to that?
Mick: I really don't know - I know they were working together on songs about six months ago but I don't know any more. I know Kieran was setting some of his poems to music, but we never used any of them.

Z: Look, can you throw any light on this bee I've got in my bonnet? Having lived there, can you tell me about Ladbroke Grove and its cultural/family/creative atmosphere?
Mick: Well we lived in Oxford Gardens, just off Ladbroke Grove for a while. I wouldn't say it was creative at all, but it had a family atmosphere about it alright....you walked out and you felt that you were part of a community. But I don't think it's true anymore because most of the people living there just lie about in their rooms stoned. There are still a few good bands down there, but it's not a particularly enlightened part of the world or anything like that.
Z: What about this taking your instruments to other people's houses and jamming, and everyone getting their paints out and painting and all that?
Mick: Well they never used to come round to our place. Davy Graham used to come in now and then and smash the place up, but the hall was never clogged with visiting saxophonists and bass players. But there was a spirit at one time.....but there were also the group gear stealers up at one end of the Grove, then the Spades, and the Irish, and all the rest of the factions and cliques, so it was pretty well split up at the same time.

Z: Do you have any sympathy with the tattered remains of the underground? Like, do you side with the 'Revolution Now' brigade for instance?
Mick: I don't think there's much of the underground left on the musical scene, but the groups which still represent underground ideas seem to have become somewhat bigoted. For example, we did a Roundhouse gig a while ago with the Pink Fairies and T.Rex. The Fairies came in and sat around with us, then TRex came through and went into a little room further on....and you should have heard the slagging the Fairies gave them - "bloody pop stars" and all that, and it really pissed me off because they were just being pig ignorant. Maybe there was some justification for it - maybe T.Rex had done or said something against what the Fairies stand for, I don't know, but on the face of it, I could not condone their attitude.
Z: How did you go down at that Roundhouse gig?
Mick: Not very well on that occasion. We used to go down a bomb there a few months ago when we used to wear our drainpipes and dirty shirts and play through beat up gear. Maybe because we've got new gear, flared trousers and combed hair, they reckon we've sold out.....I don't know, but you could sense that the vibes were not too good, though the music hadn't altered that much.
Z: It's become more polished and cleaner.
Mick: But I don't think that was the reason....I think the audience want to identify with the band, as if they could be up there playing, and they couldn't with us somehow.

Z: How do you see the English scene going over a period of say, the next year.
Mick: Well, I think it's painfully growing to a halt. The papers are doing their best to keep the enthusiasm up, but I think that the whole music business is slowly turning into a comedy show.

Pete



STEVE DAVY/bass...MICK BRADLEY/drums...KIERAN WHITE/vocals & guitar...MARTIN PUGH/guitar

Iron Butterfly
In-a-gadda-da-Vida
588 116

Metamorphosis
2401 003

Yes
Time and a word
2400 006

The Yes Album (February Release)
2400 101

Dada
2400 030