

LINER NOTES FOR THE COLLECTORS' *THE COLLECTORS*

By Richie Unterberger

The Collectors made just two albums in the late 1960s, but those records saw the Vancouver band cover quite a bit of unusual territory, even by the standards of outfits identified with the psychedelic age. Mixing a good deal of classical influence into the melodies and vocal harmonies, as well as enjoying a considerable bent for improvisation, the group were among many breaking down barriers between rock and other styles that had previously been seldom heard within rock music. On their self-titled 1968 debut album, that would culminate in one of the longest tracks ever placed on a rock LP up to that point, though the side-long "What Love (Suite)" was preceded by a handful of shorter songs that put their swirl of diverse sounds into more compact formats.

The group that would come to be known as the Collectors formed in 1966, when drummer Ross Turney was asked to form a house band for the Torch Cabaret in Vancouver. Turney recruited singer Howie Vickers and multi-instrumentalist Claire Lawrence (who played tenor saxophone, organ, flute, and recorder on the first album) from the Classics, who'd put out a few singles (sometimes under the name the Canadian Classics) before splitting. After a couple personnel shuffles, Bill Henderson joined on guitar, with another ex-Classic, Glenn Miller, filling out the lineup on bass.

"We were basically a house band in an R&B club," remembers Henderson. "I joined in the summer of 1966, and prior to that time, it hadn't done any writing to speak of that I knew of. After I joined the band, we started writing -- the main writers were myself, Howie, and Claire. We started creating new songs, took out the R&B songs, gradually threw out the covers, and populated our sets with our own songs. I consider the Collectors -- who didn't have a name at that point -- to have started around that time."

Even before they found that name, however, they were signed to the Los Angeles label Valiant Records (best known for the Association) after Jack Hirschhorn saw the band in Vancouver and got money from Valiant owner Barry De Vorzon to cut a demo in Vancouver. The demo led to a recording session in L.A. that yielded the debut single "Looking at a Baby," which was quite a substantial hit in Canada when it was issued in 1967. "And we still didn't have a name when we recorded it," admits Henderson with some amusement. "We tried all kinds of lists of names, and hadn't been able to decide on a thing. Finally, Barry phoned us up and said, 'Look, you guys, we gotta print labels now. What the hell's your name?' We said, 'We tried, man, we don't know what the name is. We haven't got it yet. But we'll try some more.' He said, 'Look, we're doing it now, take your choice, you're the Collectors or the Connection.' We sat and debated that for probably 20 minutes or a half an hour, as we had with every name that came up. Knowing we had to make a decision, we finally decided on the Collectors."

The Collectors, as they were now known, would soon be on a bigger label after the sale of Valiant (and its publishing company) to Warner Brothers. Soon they were recording their first album with producer Dave Hassinger, who -- in addition to having recently engineered some

classic records by the Rolling Stones and Jefferson Airplane -- had recently established himself as a producer of note with the Electric Prunes. (In fact Henderson played session guitar on the Prunes' third album, *Mass in F Minor*.)

The five songs on side one of *The Collectors* were full of accents that were unusual for rock'n'roll, particularly in the intricately arranged vocal harmonies, which sometimes had a Gregorian tinge; the eerie organ and jazzy sax of Lawrence; and the moody melodies, where jazz and classical influences were sometimes joined (especially on "She," "Lydia Purple," and "One Act Play") by more conventional West Coast pop-rock backup vocals. "Lydia Purple" would be chosen as the single, and was the only song on the album neither written nor selected by the Collectors themselves, as well as the only one to use session musicians (with Larry Knechtel on piano and harpsichord, Norm Jeffries on vibes, and Jesse Erlich on cello).

"We fought that one, we didn't want to record that," Henderson divulges. "We didn't want to record anybody else's song, but [Hassinger] and the recording company were going, 'You gotta have a hit, and this one sort of sounds like you guys, and we think it's a hit.' So finally we relented and worked on it; we really changed it a lot." The session guys were brought in as "we wrote arrangements that required a cellist and harpsichord, and we wanted someone that could really play harpsichord. We did the recorders ourselves. In Canada, it got tons of play." In contrast, far more enigmatic psychedelic weirdness was supplied by "Howard Christman's Older," though that wasn't nearly as far-out as the 19-minute "What Love (Suite)." The latter cut took up all of side two, at a time when that had rarely been done on a rock LP, navigating passages from serene near-jazz to all-out frenzied freakout.

The "What Love (Suite)" had its genesis in, of all places, the relatively mundane L.A. suburb of Pomona. "Claire, I guess he had a life experience, and came up with these themes and some lyrics," explains Henderson. "He came over to my unit in this motel [where] we were staying, and we took it from there to a full arrangement, basically overnight. We wrote everything out on manuscript paper, 'cause we were literate musicians -- where the breadowns were, where the riffs were, what the riffs were, the dynamics. No one wrote dynamics in rock, but we did -- where we wanted crescendos and diminuendos to happen, where things would slow down, where they'd speed up, and everybody's parts. We took it to the band, and we all struggled with it; I'm sure it got amended in many ways. It was rehearsed and rehearsed, and then we played it live for the club audience that we played for in Pomona, and it didn't go down that well. But it went down very well when we played at the [San Francisco psychedelic venues] the Fillmore, the Family Dog, and Avalon. That kind of became our calling card, that piece. We had to record it in different sections and put them together, which was all new to us.

"So many people were doing long things, but they were jams. This was not a jam. This was a structured, written piece, really in a tradition that comes out of classical music. It was something that Zappa could have done. Not that his taste was where our taste was. It wasn't; we were quite different. But he was that kind of a structural writer."

Though *The Collectors*, as Henderson acknowledges, "was not a hit record, it was quite strong in a regional kind of way. When KSAN [one of the first underground rock-oriented FM radio stations] started in San Francisco, they played it like a single; they played it every day." Yet "What Love (Suite)," "which would bring the house down [at the] Fillmore West, was despised at [New York's] Fillmore East by some...by enough. By the *Village Voice*, for one, who said the best thing we could do for rock was disband. It was nice reading that review the next day," Bill laughs. But, he adds, "It was quite influential in Europe," where it got a strong

reaction in England, Germany, and Holland in particular:

For their second and final album, the Collectors would be just as audaciously ambitious, collaborating with respected Canadian author George Ryga to provide the musical soundtrack to his play *Grass & Wild Strawberries*. That story is told on the liner notes to its CD reissue, also on Collectors' Choice Music. -- Richie Unterberger

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