

JAMES LOWE

Known most for their hit single "I Had Too Much to Dream (Last Night)," the Electric Prunes combined garage rock, pop, blues, and avant-garde electronics in unusual fashions that stretched the boundaries of 1960s recording technology. Evil fuzztone, spaced-out guitar reverb, and extraterrestrial oscillation wove around varispeed tape effects, autoharps, raunchy blues-rock vocals, Bo Diddley beats, and compelling pop-rock melodies. The results were sometimes thrilling, sometimes dismal, and sometimes downright deranged.

Forces conspired to frustrate the full realization of their artistic visions in favor of half-baked short-term strategies that are all too common in the music industry, now and in the 1960s. The Electric Prunes did seem to suffer the more extreme brunt of the stick in this regard, however. They were not permitted to record much of their own material. Their most ambitious project, an orchestral religious concept album, was devised without their input, written and arranged by someone else, and completed when members of another band were brought in to play some of the parts. And, in the unkindest cut of all, they didn't even own their own name. When the core of the original lineup disintegrated in 1968, other musicians were simply hired to record under the Electric Prunes billing, discharging two LPs that had nothing to do with the group's original sound and vision.

Lead singer James Lowe, also half of the group's primary songwriting team (with Mark Tulin), talked about the Electric Prunes' heyday via email in early 2000.

I was interested in your comment in a previous article that you were interested in pursuing "free-form garage music." Could you elaborate on that concept?

To me the best moments are when you're throwing licks back and forth and letting things happen that are outside song form. Feedback dogfighting guitars are a great release, and suggest a million things in their overtones. Even if it isn't "music"... breaking glass gives me a strong sensory reaction. Voices don't have to sing understandable lyrics, or make recognizable sounds to be musical. You can create your own crazy world!

In reviewing the group's history, something that strikes me is that it seems there was a big leap in sound and approach between your days as a garage band -- as represented by the Sanctions' "You Can Help Yourself" cut with the *Ptolemaic Terrascope's* compilation CD -- and your first days as a recording band, with "Too Much to Dream" and the first album. In hindsight, what do you view as the main stimuli to get you thinking in this direction?

We didn't want to play cover music, or win the battle of the bands. At a certain point we realized we needed to work only on recording technique and stop trying to play gigs. The record industry was where the money, acceptance, and chicks were. Dire Straits was right! From the first day we got together we wanted to make records, so we just practiced all the time. We had a lot to learn, it was a crash course. [Producer] Dave Hassinger was part of that. He prompted us to arrange things in different ways, that was his best contribution to the band, as I see it.

You've noted that you were very attracted to backwards noises and similar effects. How did this manifest itself in the Electric Prunes' recorded sound?

Backward sounds suspend reality for me, much like slow motion or time lapse film tricks the eye/brain. I can't turn away from those images. Movement I can't perceive in real time, you know it can't be happening... but it is! Guitars yaw and groan with surprise crescendos,

cymbals suuuuuuck, suuuk, suck.....I love it.

In a related question to the one above, you have also commented in the past that you were interested in combining different sounds in different ways in the group's music. This seems to me to be one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the first two albums, and one that sets the Electric Prunes aside from many other so-called psychedelic-garage bands. Would you agree with that and if so, how precisely would you say this set the group aside from much of their competition?

Yes, I would agree, though we didn't take it as far as we would have liked. A lot of groups worried about not being able to reproduce a recorded sound "live". Effects suggest things to me that are reproducible live. Once you commit to tape or disc format you've changed the presentation, anyway....why not take it as far as you can. Noise can be musical and beautiful. Vibrating a bunch of guitar strings is an effect, after all. Layering various textures puts a kind of depth to the record....I dig that.

You have said on a few occasions when interviewed that you would have liked the Electric Prunes to be primarily or wholly a studio group, or recording-only group. Had you been able to arrange it so that you had much more time to devote to studio work and experimentation, with more support from producers and management, how do you think this might have affected the group's career and recordings?

We had some problems with playing proficiency, we were learning to play the instruments as we went along. Studio costs were always a factor and we were not allowed into a session until we knew exactly what we were going to do on every track. We never jammed till "Long Day's Flight." You need room to slink around a bit in the recording studio. That's the only way to capture a magic moment. We recorded on four-track and that had some limitations. I always envied groups that "took over" a studio for weeks.... that's a luxury. I don't think there was much interest in making anything but "chart" records for Dave or the management. That's where the money was.

Annette Tucker and Nancie Mantz wrote a lot of the material on the first album, and a few songs on the second. What did you think were the best (and worst) qualities of their compositions?

Most of their material sounded like it was written for a female vocalist. I felt a bit uncomfortable with some of it; but at the time we couldn't write anything as "commercial" so we just did it. That was the weakest part of the group, as I saw it....it always comes down to the songs. Melodically they were vague and this made it hard to take a strong position on how to sing them. Doubling all the vocals didn't help, either. That can take the personality out of things. The best part was "Too Much To Dream"..... no one would have ever heard of us without that song.

Another question about Tucker and Mantz: there are few other songwriting teams, it seems to me, that were so wildly eclectic. They wrote really far-out, weird songs like "Dr. Do-Good," songs with distraught childlike imagery such as "Antique Doll," just plain unfathomable songs like "Sold to the Highest Bidder," fairly conventional ballads like "Onie," and really terrible fruity things on the first album like "Tunerville Trolley." They were also among the few female songwriters of that time that did really raunchy, lustful songs, like "Get Me to the World on Time" and "Try Me on For Size." I realize you didn't know them that well personally, but was this erratic, wide-ranging nature of their songs something you've noticed, either at the time or since then?

They were trying to get hits. When you approached songwriting in a professional manner,

you did whatever you had to to get your songs placed. I knew Annette, and she really enjoyed her craft. We always had a laugh at the variety and scope of the images...."placing lipstick kisses on the wall". They were lusty bitches!

Although some other members had occasional songwriting credits, the Tulin-Lowe team was the principal songwriting axis of the group. What kind of material you were striving for?

We just wanted to try something that would be electronic. That was always the basis. We tried to stimulate everyone to write; but it was like math class when they had to bring a song in. Nobody said "the dog ate my song"; but that's about the only excuse that wasn't used. Mark and I have always had this connection with songwriting....I'm not afraid to show him an idea, thinking he will view it as stupid.....he knows it will be stupid. So what!

The *Stockholm 67* CD provides evidence that the group could re-create the sound of the studio recordings with a lot of success. Were there any instances in which it proved especially difficult to re-create certain tracks onstage?

Strangely, that night in Stockholm we just jammed, and rather badly too. We went to Europe to blow them away and we got so many nights of people just looking, wondering what fu-- we were doing that we decided to just play it straight that night. When we toured we were promised equipment of a certain level and that rarely happened.....hard to be psycho with a Fender Champ. "Too Much To Dream" was always a challenge.....some nights it would just shimmer, when we were down deep.

It seems to me that the Electric Prunes might have influenced the very early Pink Floyd records, when Syd Barrett (who left in 1968 after the first Pink Floyd album) was the leader of Pink Floyd. The *Record Collector* article on you noted the similarity of the intro to "Are You Loving Me More" to the similarity of the intro to Pink Floyd's "Astronomy Domine," for instance. Generally speaking, early Pink Floyd made much use of the sort of psychedelic guitar textures heard on the first two Electric Prunes albums. Do you think you might have had an influence on the early Pink Floyd yourself?

People have told me that we sounded similar. To be honest I don't know most of their music. For years after the band I didn't listen to rock at all, except for albums I produced or engineered. The intro to "Are You Lovin' Me More" was Mark and my fault...there's even a cello or two..dano bass..badass. Dave kept asking what went in the "holes"?

Dave Hassinger sometimes gets a lot of credit for the Electric Prunes' recorded sound. In general terms, how would you summarize Hassinger's principal contributions, and what proportion of the final result was the band's and what was his?

Dave signed us. Not too many people give you a break. Taught me a lot about BASIC recording. Fancied himself a producer. Richie Podolor and Bill Cooper did most of the recording work, and I think, resented being referred to as "electricians" on the records. If I wanted phasing or a delay effect, they were the ones I would ask how to do it, not Dave. He was old school single phone military trained. I always had run-ins with him on sounds.

What specifically Richie Podolor and Bill Cooper contribute to the Electric Prunes sound on record?

Richie is a very good musician and producer in his own right. He has had many hits. He knows how to do it. Bill will stay and record till the cows come home and he knows the console and recording technique. Richie played excellent mandolin on "It's Not Fair." It must have been hell for them dealing with five [San Fernando] Valley idiots trying to learn how to play, and an exploitive ego maniacal producer.

I want to make sure I have details on some aspects of the first Reprise recordings straight. You have mentioned that there was a good deal of woodshedding, and some recording, done at Leon Russell's house, but that most of the tracks that ended up at the first album were done at American Recording Studios. This is correct?

Yes. We brought some of the basic tracks from Leon Russell's house to American Studios and used a few of them on the album. But the bulk of the recording was done there [at American].

And about Leon Russell: What was the reason behind the woodshedding at Russell's house -- just getting prepared for proper studio recordings, and trying to hone the material in a studio setting?

Yes. I think Dave wanted to deal with us in a place where he wasn't paying studio costs until he could be sure we could do it. We could, from the first sessions on... because we had practiced. Leon was producing Gary Lewis and the Playboys at the time and he was never there, anyway. The Shindogs seemed to be running the place, it was crazy. Dave and Leon were acquainted and I think Leon wanted to do something nice for Dave, and keep his sideburns too.

I want to try and get straight what produced the bee-buzzing guitar effect at the beginning of "I Had Too Much to Dream Last Night." In interviews with *Record Collector* and *Here 'Tis*, you have stated that it was a fragment of backwards tape of [guitarist] Ken Williams playing around with his Bigsby pedal. In the biography of the group on Haydn Jones's Electric Prunes website, Ken Williams is quoted as saying it was produced by a Bigsby wiggle stick. To clarify: Is the Bigsby wiggle stick the same device as the Bigsby pedal? And, was the beginning definitely from a backwards tape of the Bigsby effect?

We were recording at Leon Russell's house and you couldn't see the studio from the control room....it was a converted bedroom or something. We were recording on 4-track and just flipping the tape over and re-recording when we got to the end. Dave cued up a tape and didn't hit record and the playback in the studio was way up....ear-shattering vibrating jet guitar.....Ken had been shaking his Bigsby wiggle stick with some fuzztone and tremolo at the end of the tape. Forward it was cool....backward it was Amazing. I ran into the control room and said "what was that?" They didn't have the monitors on so they hadn't heard it.....I made Dave cut it off and save it for later.....we used it on "Too Much to Dream."

Although "Get Me to the World on Time" was not as big a hit as "I Had Too Much to Dream," I think it's just as good, and just as adventurous in its production. How did you feel this rated in comparison to "I Had Too Much to Dream," and was this a track you enjoyed doing?

It always lacked something to me, a solo or something. We wanted to do some wild electronic effects and a tone generator is what we settled for.

I have a few questions about the sounds heard in "Get Me to the World": How were those violin-like sounds at the beginning produced? Were you aware of applying a

Bo Diddley-like beat and guitar riffs to parts of the song, and if so how did that come about? And what is that effect near the end, where it sounds like a spaceship taking off into the stratosphere?

The beginning of that song is Dave Hassinger groaning through a mic, into the tremolo on a fender amp. That low range wavelike pulse IS a voice thru a tremolo unit. It creates pulse like overtones that sound like strings....".here I go" is me singing the song. We Loved BO DIDDLEY...I grew up on that beat....I ate to that beat....I.....did a lot of things to that beat. We played on the bill with him for a week at the Troubadour. We were backing up a singer for a live album. Don't remember any spaceship, though. That is the tone generator.....just an oscillator I think. A very simple device.

You have noted that for the first album, you did not have total freedom in selection of songs to record, which accounts for the presence of only two group originals on the LP. Was there additional original material that you could have put on the album that was never used? If so, do you remember what the material sounded like?

If Dave didn't like the song we didn't record it. Mark and I wanted to do our stuff and by *Underground* we just wouldn't do the "Trolley" anymore.

How do you think that departure of Weasel, during the *Underground* sessions, affected the sound of the band?

He took this great Magnatone amp with him....it would make a guitar sound like an organ...had a unique tremolo too. We all liked Weasel. I played on more stuff to fill in and Mark played everything.....he still can.

Do you know what those strange sounds are on "The Great Banana Hoax," where it sounds like a motorcycle revving up at the beginning?

Voice on tremolo, again at top. That is a "growl" done vocally and slowed down some. I wanted to suggest moving furniture in heaven when we did it. It was just a device to make you take notice. A rock swirling around in a bucket.

What is that crying noise heard near the end of "Antique Doll"?

Us crying at double speed. We played around with tape speed a lot....vso they called it.

"It's Not Fair" is (like much of the record) peculiar in composition: a fairly standard shitkicking country-blues-rock tune that suddenly goes haywire at the end. What did you and Mark have in mind when you write this and devised the tag?

It was written for my mom, she said we never did any country tunes. I wanted to write a song for Mark to "preach" on.....it's so unlike him. We just laughed at Dave, he said country was a no no for a rock band...so we made it more country. We were just having some fun.

I think a hit-single-that-never-was on the second album is Goffin-King's "I Happen to Love You." What was it that attracted the band to the song? Also, were you aware that there was a previous single of the song by the Myddle Class, an East Coast group whose bass player was Charles Larkey, Carole King's future husband?

We thought that song was cool.....I was surprised they didn't think it good enough for a 45. Didn't know there was another version of it...I know Ellen Goffin, Gerry's ex-wife, perhaps

there is a cosmic connection?

And, two "noises" question for "I Happen to Love You": what is that harp-like sound at the beginning (sounds like a run down piano strings?), and the instrument that plays the instrumental break (sounds like an electronic keyboard to me)?

Autoharp at top. Vox electronic organ guitar solo. They brought a prototype in and took it back after they heard what we did with it.

"Dr. Do-Good" is certainly my nomination for strangest Electric Prunes track; it sounds like a kiddie horror movie or children's hour theme run amok. What are your memories of this song and its recording?

Dave laughing at the end. I told him I couldn't do it and he kept showin' me how so we said, "you do it". It reminded me of Nervous Norvus who had a song called "Transfusion".....novelty stuff.

Do you remember how that effect at the very beginning was achieved, in which a bunch of voices blur together in a distorted fashion?

That is Ken Williams on a prototype slide guitar, kind of a steel guitar thing someone gave us. It was overdubbed numerous times and turned around, I think. I liked it, real noise.

Were you pleased with *Underground* overall, and would you say it is the most accurate representation of the band's skills, particularly as it has the most original material of any of the three albums?

We had lost heart by then....we knew we could have done better. That is where we were then.

What is your perspective on how the business machinations of Reprise/Hassinger affected the group's development? From the perspective of a listener such as myself going by the albums and your comments to me and others, it seems as though they had no vision of long-range potential of or investment in the band. Even from a business perspective, it might seem obvious in hindsight that, when a band is really starting to find themselves and their vision, as you seemed to with *Underground*, that is the time in which they need artistic and financial support to really bloom. However, on the contrary the business side seemed to do a lot to short-circuit the band's potential by pretty much assigning them the *Mass in F Minor* project, and then treating the band as just a name into which any musicians or concepts could be plugged. I know this is hardly unique, and still occurs depressingly often in today's entertainment industry as well, but it seems like quite a screwed-up approach.

Underground was an issue between David and the band. He thought it was unprofessional. He wore alpaca sweaters through the Cultural Revolution, for chrissake. The album didn't sell, so we thought he might be right. I don't think the management or David liked our music. Why support an effort if they didn't believe in it. They wanted teen stars, not guys experimenting with noises. I always felt like they were in another world. looking into something they didn't really understand, or want to. If you couldn't produce them a hit, out with your ass! They believed they were responsible for anything good that had happened and thought..."well then, let's just get rid of those troublemakers." They got what they deserved.....no more hits.

Was Reprise's incompetence/competence directly a consequence of the band being signed to Hassinger's independent production company, rather than the label?

Why would Reprise support it, it was Hassinger's group. They had their own artists to worry about. If we had gotten hits they might have taken notice. I'm not sure they knew we were one of their acts. They probably did their best.

It seems to me that Hassinger lost interest in the band very quickly, as if when there was not an obvious follow-up single to "Get Me to the World on Time," he thought the band wasn't worth bothering with at all. As I said above, this seems particularly asinine considering that *Underground* was demonstrating your creative growth and potential. Any speculation as to what was behind Hassinger's attitude in this regard?

I always thought he saw us as a threat after *Underground*. We refused to do the album he wanted to make and he saw we wouldn't back down. I had named the album. The band even went in and took the picture, found the girls face in the trash bin at the photographer's studio for the background.....this must have seemed like the inmates were taking over the asylum to Dave. I told him Reprise could do the back cover, so as not to offend Ed Thrasher, the art director for the label. They just made a negative image of the front cover on the back.....very clever.

In a documentary about the Grateful Dead's *Anthem of the Sun* album, the band remember how difficult it was to work with such a straight guy [Hassinger]. They said the thing that finally got Hassinger to throw up his hands, give up, and walk out of the studio, never to work with them again, was when they said they wanted the sound of "thick air" on one particular track.

Dave told me about it and I wrote an instrumental after the band broke up with that title because I thought it was a cool phrase. He told me they sat around for a couple of hours trying to capture it on tape.....those were the Owsley days. Dave used to lay on the control room floor of American Studios and read the paper while we played tracks. That's not an inspiring production posture, perhaps he was doing the same with the Dead?

You have noted that the album *Stockholm 67* [released in the 1990s] does not actually represent the most daring and adventurous material you were playing live on the European 1967 tour. Were their other songs, particularly from the second album, that you were playing live that did not make it into the set that was recorded for *Stockholm 67*? If so, do you remember what these were, and how in general the more experimental facets of the group's live set sounded?

We took steel slide guitars and some noisemakers and did the "Great Banana Hoax" pie for 20 minutes with kalimbas and stuff. We were vibrating brats from the States....a production band.....they probably thought we was posers, but we wanted to play.

Mike Gannon was part of the band for a while, for recordings and for live performances including the European tour. What did he add to the band during his time in the lineup?

Mike loved to play. He would follow Ken in harmonies, or drive through and play a lead if we let him. He suggested the harmony to my riff for "You Never Had It Better" and played that chunka-chunka rhythm in the verse. He was positive and like fresh air to me.

You've recalled meeting Jimi Hendrix when you were in England in late 1967. Though I realize the interaction was brief, do you recall Hendrix saying anything about what

he thought of the Electric Prunes and their music? And, would you think you might have influenced Hendrix? I can hear a similarity between, say, the kind of effect that opens "I Had Too Much to Dream" and the wavering, building guitar sound Hendrix used to open "Foxy Lady."

Never thought of it; he never said anything about it...all he said was "want somma this"? He was a nice person.

Was there room for much contribution from the band on *Mass in F Minor*, considering it was arranged and written by David Axelrod? If so, in what ways?

Not much, except for the tracks we played on. They wanted a sound from us to hang the mass on.....it was interesting.

While I realize *Mass in F Minor* was not an album that was nearly as representative of the band as the previous recordings were, are there any tracks or aspects of the record that stick out as highlights or something you enjoyed doing?

I grew up in Catholic school, my mom was glad I was doing a mass.

You have referred to the band's live performance of *Mass in F Minor* as a disaster (in *Record Collector*). What exactly were the circumstances of the performance, and what were the disastrous elements?

Ask Mark [Tulin] about that, Don Randi was conducting, he was late and very sunburned, looked like a lobster. The musicians were asking what page we were on.....We had a rehearsal.....but....ever heard a symphony orchestra out of whack????? They thought we were making fun of Jesus or something.

Lastly, I know that you have been playing with several other members of the original band lately. What's the latest update on those activities?

Mark, Mike Fortune (aka Quint), Ken and I have been putting some sessions on tape. Peter Lewis from Moby Grape has been playing with us too, he's cool. I forgot how much fun music is. Take away the profit motive and all that greed and you get back to trying to make a good record.....it's very hard. I think people will be surprised.

This is the usual 20/20 hindsight situation. But looking back on the breakup of the original members in 1968, do you see in retrospect how things might have been done differently -- on part of either the band, the label, or the management -- to enable the group to continue and progress?

Some things are meant to be short and sweet. Life is but a dream.

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