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## Interview with The Electric Prunes



**The Electric Prunes** are one of the finest examples of psychedelic garage punk. Their 'I Had Too Much To Dream Last Night' rattled up the billboard in the late sixties to give a rallying call to all the pretenders out there who thought they were *tuff enuff*.

With a career that had many ups and downs, including a disasterous time with the legendary David Axelrod, a band break up, psychedelic drugs, being shafted by management and a phoenix like resurgence, we caught up with lead singer **James Lowe**, and noise-smith **Mark Tulin** chat about their

**new LP**, *those* David Axelrod LPs, and the rise and fall The Electric Prunes.

### *Hello, how's things?*

James Lowe (pictured with Gonzo bug eyes) - Very well and thanks for asking.

### *What are the psychedelic misfits of The Electric Prunes up to at the moment?*

JL - Well you walked in on these misfits as we are finishing up our new CD. I know no one wants to know about a new CD from and old band; but we got one. This will be the third

album from us since we found our way back from the mother ship, it will probably be the last studio album. Ha ha, I just realized it sounds a bit like the Spinal Tap trilogy story, don't it?!?! Everyone expects you'll just keep playing that same stuff from the past. Fun but not very interesting.



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 1960s  
 1970s  
 1980s  
 1990s  
 2000 onwards  
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 Books  
 Clubs  
 Film/DVD  
 Hot 45s  
 Instruments  
 Interviews  
 Live news and reviews  
 Music on TV  
 Music reviews  
 New bands  
 News  
 Online music and podcasts  
 T-shirts  
 Websites  
 Weird merchandise

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February 2007  
 January 2007  
 December 2006

Mark Tulin (pictured with snorkel) - We have just finished our new LP, "Feedback." It is the best work the band has ever done both in the performance and the material. It's all there this time, the full array of garage/psych armament - fuzz, tremelo, humour, gnarl, spit, weird and eclectic songs and sounds. This is as good as we can be. James, Ken (Williams) and I appear on it along with some friends, old and new including Joe Dooley (from 67 and some recent tours), Peter Lewis (from Moby Grape) and Harley Feinstein (from Sparks).

### **What does 'Feedback' sound like?**

JL - Sounds like Prunes. We suffer from everything sounding one way no matter when it was recorded. I think this one is stripped down to some strong basic elements and you can hear through the veil. My opinion as the engineer: it sounds like our band. We still do things the old-style way in the recording studio. We play everything and get the sounds at the amps, no cut and paste. This CD is a genuine effort characterized by the fact it is dark, some challenge to listen to, is kind of kooky in places and is deceptively simple sounding on the surface. It started out as a big fat double album and we mercifully pared it down to 10 picture songs. The album title is 'Feedback'... obvious for us... feed-back: return of a fraction of the output signal to the input. We figured everyone could use a dose of feedback in their lives.

### ***I saw you a few years ago during your tour of the UK. Do you still feel you have something to prove to the young pretenders, or are you just doing what feels right to you?***

JL - We started playing again because we were angered by people writing articles saying we didn't play our instruments in 1967; but then the music grabs you by the ass and you are seduced. This isn't about proving anything at this point it is just finishing something we started a long time ago. We can't compete with young bands but we do play it our own way and I have noticed they seem to find that amusing. At this point in the game we have to do this for ourselves; if your lips don't feel right nothing will come out of the tuba.

MT - Thank God for "young pretenders" for without them there is no advancement. I have much more of an issue with the "old pretenders" - either bands going out with no original members or bands just showing up and walking through it as if the major part of their act was showing up. No heart, no sense of history. I'd rather not do it at all and I sure have no interest in seeing it. We have always done what feels right to us without much regard for what someone else would think of it. Incumbent in that is the risk that you will be the only one listening to what you have created... but I think that's all a musician or artist can do, lay out his or her beliefs and tastes in whatever form they choose and then set it free to be either accepted or rejected. If enough people hear/see something in what you do, you are called successful. It is important to remember that such a judgment has nothing to do with whether or not what you are doing has any merit. It can seem a harsh process, but then again, there is no room for the faint of heart in rock and roll.

### ***Speaking of the shows, are you ever surprised at how many young faces appear in the crowd?***

JM - I am still surprised anyone shows up or still knows the band after all these years? Yes, most of the time you expect the 50 year olds with beatle haircuts and bald spots to be

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there but we have had a healthy dose of young bands and kids come by just to see what's up. They seem to enjoy it. Quite a few dad's and son's and that really feels good. I didn't listen to my dad's music.

MT - We are always excited to see younger people at our concerts. We've played several colleges where the audience came with no idea as to who or what we were. Each time the reaction was, "Wow, we didn't know there was music like that!" My real issue isn't with the younger audience; they seem open and accepting of what we have to offer. It's those people who think in terms of "oldies" only that drive me bats. First of all, the good times they remember so fondly weren't so good and whatever they remember probably is wrong. But they will tell you how much they love your band then won't leave the couch to go hear you play. They tell you how happy they are you are still playing but don't support the music.

Don't get me wrong, some of the old music is great but there should be room for those same musicians to keep making and creating music in spite of what a calendar might say. It's the spirit that's inside playing, not a person's age. If the spirit is young and alive, so is the music. No matter who it is, their music did not spring into existence from a vacuum. There is a history to it all; someone did something that led you to where you are. Sadly, in the US, unlike in Europe, we don't revere the musicians of the past while they are alive... only when they die... I know when I was younger I would go anywhere for the chance to hear the musicians who came before me – Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Richard. If they were in town I was there. The shame is that in rock music, age appears to matter. In this way it is about the only form of music that doesn't respect itself. In most other art forms, as long as the artist is capable of performing at a high level, their new works are encouraged and welcomed. In rock, it seems that, with rare exceptions, if you're from a certain period you are held there forever. Our band is one of the few groups still performing from our era to be turning out new music, rather than rehashing what they've done before.

***'I Had Too Much To Dream Last Night' is probably your best known song, what do you think of it now?***

JL - It has held up pretty well over the years for a love song. Some songs don't sound too relevant after the passage of time but it is still rather snappy. We enjoy playing it live because it is a challenge to reproduce so we don't resent it, and if it weren't for that song I probably wouldn't be answering your questions.

MT - "Too Much To Dream" remains a defining musical picture of a time and attitude. I am happiest that it still seems to hold up well after all these times. Not everything from that time does. I watched "Easy Rider" the other night and back in the 60's it was one of *the* movies to see, a defining generational experience. Now, I'm not so sure it carries the same impact. Much art is dependent on the socio-economic environment in which it is created. Some music and some films capture a specific feeling/mood of a specific time but when that time's energy has gone the art, on its own without the external impetus and sensibility, can't sustain the feeling. Music should be timeless. Close your eyes, listen to "Feedback" and "Too Much To Dream" and tell me which was done when. Come to an Electric Prunes concert and, if you let yourself go, you won't be able to tell what year it is...

***What do you remember from the time when it was being recorded and released?***

JL - I remember everyone called it the "weird" one when we had a group of 5 or 6 demos in

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progress. No one thought it was a hit, just weird. At that time radio play was essential to break a record and I remember a record exec' saying it was nice but there were no stations around to play that kind of stuff. It was released in 1966 and crept up the charts so slowly we thought it was a dead issue. It took so long we got a hit with it in 1967. At that time without a hit you were finished and this was our second record so we were really on the line. Then one day I was driving in LA and I heard it on the radio. That was all I ever wanted.

***'Underground' is widely regarded as a 'masterpiece' by many now. What are your memories of that LP?***

JL - Standards must have slipped? That album was us bolting for the door with the producer. He hated it and let us just do what we wanted from artwork to song selection to playing. It wasn't that we didn't like Dave Hassinger but he had some corny ideas about song selection and we wanted to try to do something a little different than the friggin' "Toonerville Trolley" stuff. Funny, even today the writers Annette Tucker and Jill Jones ask why we did that number? I last heard the album when we remixed the "Lost Dreams" compilation. I haven't heard it since, except we do play material from it live.

MT - I have a hard time listening to "Underground". It is hard to separate the experience, good or bad (and in this case it was mostly uncomfortable if not downright nasty) from the end result. While we were making it our producer and manager were continually telling us the material was crap and that we couldn't play. After many arguments in the studio they basically threw their hands up halfway through and just let us alone to finish. That many people now tell us it is a "masterpiece", while complimentary, is ironic seeing as how, back then, it came and went without barely raising any dust at all. When I do listen to the album I only hear the possibilities and where we could have gone unencumbered by all the bullshit and petty turf wars. However, we still believe in the material as much as we did then. That's why we include several songs from "Underground" in our live shows. Hearing them live only reinforces our belief in their value.

***The Electric Prunes have had a tough time with dodgy management and the like. You had what seemed like very little control over your debut LP, and then again with the David Axelrod albums...***

JL - Our biggest problem was we were too trusting. We were pretty green and thought "they" knew better. Ha Ha. Every band has horror stories about some record company or manager. It goes with the territory. The control method was to berate us and make us feel we needed to make up for past sins or something? Listen to Hassinger whistling at us like dogs on the false starts on the Hideaway cut in the "Lost Dreams" album. It is the same technique battering husbands use with their wives. Do i think it hurt us? No. It made us stronger.

MT - Aside from what we wanted to drink, we had almost no say in our first album's material. Had we had any input I can guarantee some of the songs on that album would be nowhere to be found on any Electric Prunes album. Also, we were just about 17 years old working with an experienced engineer; we assumed he knew more than we did. What we did manage to sneak through were the arrangements and sounds on songs such as "Too Much To Dream" and "Get Me To The World On Time". Those, were and remain ours.

JL - That is us on the Mass in F Minor album but it is someone else on Release Of An Oath. That album was done after we all left. We had already offended the catholics, why not take out after the Jews?

MT - The Mass Album was, and is, Dave Axelrod's concept, creation and project. We were a recognized marketable product name that was supposed to help sell his concept. The music was pretty much charted (except for the guitar/bass solos) and after cutting the initial movement "Christe/Kyrie Eleison" half the band was replaced by other musicians in order to get "the job" done faster. James kept asking when we would get to put Electric Prune sounds on the record and was continually told later. Well, as often happens, later turned into never. While working with Dave Axelrod was a treat and education for me, I always felt as if we were just poorly paid sidemen on that album. The original members had nothing to do with the follow-up Axelrod albums.

***How was it touring the Axelrod LPs?***

MT - We had been told we were going to perform The Mass at Saint Patrick's in NYC. Didn't happen. Instead, after only about half a rehearsal we gave it a good shot at a high school here in Los Angeles. It was, without a doubt, one of the worst performances in the history of rock and roll. Had people been willing to commit the time and money necessary to properly prepare and rehearse the material, it could have been a cool performance piece. Instead, like with most things label, the short term drowned out the big picture. However, there is still hope. At Little Steven's Underground Garage Festival in NYC we ran into Don Randi (who played keyboards on The Mass) and he asked if we would be interested, if he put the arrangements and strings together, in giving a performance another go. So, who knows, The Mass may rise again.

***Is it true that Kenny Loggins was an Electric Prune?***

JL - Great trivia question... I was gone by then.

MT - Yes, Kenny Loggins was in the band for one tour. James had quit the band and we tried to carry on. Somehow I met a piano player/songwriter who brought Kenny into the group. Even then he was a star. He loved playing and always gave everything he had to the audience. By this time I was pretty burned out so he had to really be shining to catch my attention. I used to watch him while we were performing – pure joy. One tour and out, that was it for Kenny's Prune experience and my participation in the band. The last tour we went on, without a drummer, not doing any of our hit records let me know it was truly over...

***Do you feel fortunate to have been a part of, and helped shape, the sixties and seventies?***

JL - We are glad that we are included. I am glad the group happened because it was a learning experience; but I denied I was in the band for 30 years because I had been made to feel the adventure was a failure. Now people look back and find something interesting about it. Go figure?

MT - Nice to hear, but I don't know that we helped shape anything. I am, all things considered, glad that I was there for the sixties. It was truly an electric time. The best thing

of all was that wherever you went, there was passion in the air. Like something or dislike something, you were passionate about it. Everyone stood, and stood up, for something... and the music reflects that. Our era may not have had the best players in the world making music, but we sure gave it all we had. For many bands music was an audio manifestation of a greater social consciousness. We were attempting to change things and in doing so challenged most accepted norms, including song structure and sound forms, not getting our mugs on TV.

***The track 'Hey Mr President' is probably as relevant now as it was in the sixties with the war in the middle east. Do you feel sad that young groups don't seem to be as interested in the state of politics/the world as your generation?***

JL - We had nothing to do with 'Hey Mr President'. An insensitive record company put our pictures on the sleeve of that record with some other guys playing. I have never heard it; but I don't think we would have made a political comment record. Our observations were global and human nature oriented. Presidents come and go (hopefully). I am surprised more groups don't come up with that *Buffalo Springfield* angst stuff now. There is plenty of injustice to write about. I guess if you're trying to keep gas in the Beemer you don't have time for protest?

MT - After we quit our management company and producer put together some other guys to be The Electric Prunes. I have nothing against the guys who came in after us, had I been in their position and been offered a chance to get a leg up in the music business I would have replaced me too. The important point of the question is that, in fact, when you look around it is sad to see that not that much has changed. Hair styles, clothing and all that, sure, but bottom line, it is about the same. We have immigration/integration/assimilation problems, we're at war, bigotry remains, people continue to extol differences not similarities and the population seems to be polarizing. Sounds familiar to me. The shame is that our generation, after all it promised and said it believed in, is just perpetuating the status quo. I am embarrassed and pissed off that the generation of Pink Floyd, Cream, and Jimi Hendrix now appears more interested in attending a Celine Dion concert in Vegas. They don't listen to rock and roll anymore. The generation that led civil rights marches and anti-war protests now sits passively by as civil rights take a hike. I look at what is going on now in Iraq and imagine what would be taking place in the streets and press were this the 60's. Yet, instead of taking to the streets people are taking to their Tivos. Good news, there are still some keeping the spirit alive.

***Many of your peers like Arthur Lee, Syd Barrett... have now passed away. Do you feel like you're survivors of the acid casualties?***

JL - Looking at us, no. Knowing us, yes. We dodged some bullets, for sure.

MT - Just surviving isn't such an accomplishment, merely a matter of DNA, physiology and luck. Without growth existence is like treading water. To be playing the same music without growth or insight years later no different. We wouldn't have started playing again if we didn't think we had more to present than just some musical survivors. What I think has survived with us is the 60's spirit. We are better musicians and songwriters than we were back then, we have managed to keep that same fire and energy alive. A lot has to do with the fact that we burned bright for a while but then it all came crashing down so fast that we never had a chance to burn out. We just smoldered in the background for a while then the

fire, through mixing our "Lost Dream" compilation CD, was rekindled anew. The collapse of the band was so emotionally destructive to me that I kept that desire to play music buried for many years. When we decided to do this again we swore we would only do it if it were fun, if we could still be creative and if we had a passion for it. Without any of those, I'm packing it up and going home

#### ***Are you planning another visit to the UK?***

JL - We want to do one last round if we can. We hope this 'Feedback' thing will be a reason to play live somewhere. We are supposed to play in Spain in December so that is at least in the neighbourhood. It has been a great experience getting to get out and play music again. This is an expensive hobby if you are not in the mainstream and don't have a current hit. That aside, when would you ever get the chance to step up and hit the ball 40 years after you were a player? Never! We thank all who have listened and supported us and even thank those that said "don't do it". That directive just spurred us on.

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