

LINER NOTES FOR THE ELECTRIC PRUNES' *MASS IN F MINOR*

By Richie Unterberger

The background to the bizarre twist of events leading to the Electric Prunes' 1968 album *Mass in F Minor* needs some explanation. The Prunes' previous LP, *Underground*, had been the most accurate representation of their growing experimental psychedelic vision, particularly as they wrote the majority of the material. However, it had not sold too well or yielded a hit single. The producer that had signed the group to his independent production company, Dave Hassinger, was not interested in experimentation as much as he was in commercial records. With Electric Prunes manager Lenny Poncher and arranger David Axelrod, a new strategy was hatched in which Axelrod would write and arrange an album combining classical music, the sort of Gregorian vocals heard in some religious music, and freakout psychedelia. It would be sung entirely in Latin, no less.

Whether the Electric Prunes were a suitable vehicle for the experiment is questionable. "They wanted a sound from us to hang the mass on," says lead singer James Lowe. "We came in and there are these charts. We were slow and only Mark [Tulin, Electric Prunes bassist] read music." Although it is the band you hear on the three songs that comprised side one of the album ("Kyrie Eleison," "Gloria," "Credo"), the group were going too slow for Axelrod's tastes. As a consequence members of a Canadian group, the Collectors (later Chilliwack), were enlisted to help complete the album, although Lowe did all of the lead vocals, and Tulin and drummer Quint from the Prunes do play on every track. (Engineer Richie Podolor assisted on guitar as well.)

"I like and respect Dave Axelrod," comments Tulin. "I think he's a brilliant musician and he greatly helped expand my musical knowledge. However, he wasn't us. We were a 'known entity' plugged into an outside concept; a means to someone else's end. Trouble was, we were a band, not an inorganic artificial product that could be manipulated at will." For all its apples-and-oranges conception, the record is a nifty psychedelic curio, with its unusual mixture of searing acid rock guitar and subdued, harmonized Gregorian singing. The quasi-choral effect, incidentally, was achieved by having Lowe double-track most of the vocals.

Undoubtedly, the most famous track on the record -- and the best one, to most ears -- is the opener, "Kyrie Eleison." The Electric Prunes were always masters of the psychedelic guitar reverb, and the first part of the song has some of their best echoed-to-infinity axework, yielding in the final section to some passages of fierce distorted sustain. This is also the only one of the six songs that features only standard rock instrumentation, without the orchestral embellishments of horns and strings Axelrod would deploy throughout the rest of the album. "Kyrie Eleison" is familiar to most listeners, of course, through its inclusion on the soundtrack to the classic 1969 counterculture film *Easy Rider*, starring Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda. Somehow "Kyrie Eleison" was rescued from obscurity and used in the scenes just after Fonda and Hopper arrive in New Orleans for

Mardi Gras, including the one where they visit a local brothel.

While "Kyrie Eleison" might be the *Mass in F Minor* cut most representative of the band, some of their character does come through via their instrumental contributions to the rest of the recording, particularly in the guitar work. There is some intense, shrieking sustain that isn't too far removed from the wildest, most distorted solos that Jorma Kaukonen was playing for the Jefferson Airplane during the *After Bathing at Baxter's* era. The vocal harmonies are graceful and understated, and on the whole the result is a lot less gauche than it could have been (and would be, on later rock concept albums of all stripes). Lowe, however, is understandably nonchalant when asked if there were any aspects of the experience that stuck out as highlights: "I grew up in Catholic school, my Mom was glad I was doing a mass."

The one and only live performance of the album did not go as well as it could have. Tulin: "We were on tour when we were told we would be performing the mass almost immediately upon our return. Aside from the time spent recording it, this would be the first time we played the mass; the first time we played it straight through without the stops/starts facilitated by recording. There was one rehearsal, at the Musician's Union rehearsal hall. Four celli, four French horns, six vocalists (from the Smothers Brothers show), and the band. James took charge of the vocalists and I was put in charge of the musicians. I was told I was to play bass, play the organ and conduct. Didn't work, but I believe we managed to at least talk our way through the charts.

"That night, at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, we had the same complement of musicians/singers plus Richie Podolor (our recording engineer and a great guitarist in his own right) and Don Peake added on guitar. Don Randi was called in for the concert to play organ and conduct. Only problem was that prior to the last-minute call Don had spent the entire day on his boat. He was sunburned and burned out from the day. Everyone had to use music stands to read the charts because no one on stage knew the songs or arrangements.

"From the outset the performance was a disaster. We missed the intro on the first song and it never got any better. Amp speakers blew, charts fell off music stands and everyone was, in general, in a complete state of confusion. Ended up each song turned into one long jam. I think we were, at times, all in the same key. I made my way over to the four celli and four French horns and told them to 'jam in E.' Somehow we would hit a break and James would manage a vocal. Mercifully, this all ended and as we were leaving a few 'fans' said, 'We didn't know you guys were into avant-garde jazz.'"

The Electric Prunes would break up in 1968, due to both artistic and financial frustrations. Lowe was the first to go, although one tour was done with a lineup including some of the other members and, of all people, a then-unknown Kenny Loggins. There would be two more albums that were the Electric Prunes in name only, as the name belonged to their producer, Dave Hassinger. None of the musicians on those LPs had played on the first three Electric Prunes albums, or even played in the band at all prior to 1968. A 1969 non-LP single by the group bearing the Electric Prunes monicker during that era, "Hey Mr. President"/"Flowing Smoothly," is included on this CD as bonus tracks.

In 2000, Lowe and Tulin, now established as a film/video producer and psychologist respectively, are playing together again, and making some recordings in Lowe's studio with Quint and Prunes guitarist Ken Williams. Speculates Tulin, "Our third album, had it not

been the mass, I believe would have, at the very least, had a true band feel and sound, one even more representative of who we were. In addition, we were just beginning to understand how to use the studio as its own instrument. Left to our own devices I think we would have expanded that knowledge. In addition, I think we would have stretched a little more in using vocal sounds as a compliment to the band instruments. We were heading in a direction that would have allowed us to explore more intricate tonal ideas involving subtle manipulations of sound and song structure to create a more sensory and sensual experience." -- Richie Unterberger

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