

LINER NOTES FOR THE ELECTRIC PRUNES' *UNDERGROUND*

By Richie Unterberger

"Noise can be musical and beautiful. Once you commit to tape or disc format you've changed the presentation; why not take it as far as you can. 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." -- James Lowe, lead singer, the Electric Prunes

Underground, the second Electric Prunes album, was the closest the group came to realizing Lowe's ideals. Their debut LP (also now available as a Collectors' Choice CD) had already unveiled their intriguing mix of bluesy garage rock, savvy pop-rock hooks; pioneering experiments with guitar reverb, oscillation, varispeed tapes; and touches of autoharp, well-placed fuzztone, and miscellaneous psychedelic effects. On the follow-up, they would go even more *Underground*, so to speak. *Underground* was also the Electric Prunes record most representative of the group's vision, as they wrote more than half the material, after being limited to just two original compositions on the first album.

Underground's evocation of a mysterious psychedelic funhouse that is both enchanting and distressing gets into motion with "The Great Banana Hoax," the hoax being that the words have nothing whatsoever to do with bananas or hoaxes. Instead it's a classy pop-psychedelic tune, anchored by killer Mark Tulin bass lines and the group's knack for dramatic stop-start tempos and pauses. Yet the band's love for embellishing tracks with unpredictable, undefinably weird sounds could not be suppressed. That noise near the beginning that sounds like a motorcycle revving up is actually a slowed-down vocal growl; the percussive effects that sound like a rock swirling around a bucket near the end are, Tulin thinks, made by a kalimba brought to the band via Africa.

The next three songs seem to drift into a concept album of a psychedelic lost childhood with both blissful and sinister edges, populated by dolls, toys, and kids that inhabit the netherworld between reality and illusion. The best of these, "Antique Doll," was written by Annette Tucker and Nancie Mantz, the team responsible for the Electric Prunes' biggest hit, "I Had Too Much to Dream (Last Night)"; Tucker and Mantz also contributed two other tracks to *Underground*. The gauzy, moody texture of the cut takes on a particularly creepy edge with the sci-fi-like cries near the end, which Lowe says is "us crying at double speed. We played around with tape speed a lot." Childhood imagery is abandoned on "It's Not Fair," a standard, if tongue-in-cheek, country-blues tune that derails into a strange spoken coda with maniacally ascending keys, like a wind-up toy suddenly accelerating out of control.

For all the eccentricity of their original compositions (and most of the ones given to them by Tucker and Mantz), the group could deftly balance the weirdness with high-caliber pop-rock tunes from outside sources. There's no better example of this than "I Happen to Love You," the most undeservedly obscure gem penned by one of the greatest pop-rock songwriting teams, Gerry Goffin and Carole King. It could be Goffin-King's bluesiest, sultriest effort, originally done on a 1966 flop single by the little-known New York band the Myddle Class. The Electric Prunes add ethereal autoharp, gently wah-wahing

guitars, and a Vox electronic organ solo to the arrangement. "We thought that song was cool," declares Lowe. "I was surprised they didn't think it was good enough for a 45." As for that Vox organ on the track, "they brought a prototype in, and took it back after they heard what we did with it."

The failure of "I Happen to Love You" to appear as a single is even more mystifying given that the song that was chosen as the first single off the album could hardly have been less likely to succeed. "Dr. Do-Good," certainly the zaniest composition Tucker-Mantz crafted for the group, is an unhinged slice of psychobabble, walking the tightrope between kiddie singalong tune and outright madness. That scrape of distorted noise at the very beginning is, according to Lowe, lead guitarist "Ken Williams on a prototype slide guide, kind of a steel guitar thing someone gave us. It was overdubbed numerous times and turned around, I think." The deranged Bugs Bunny-like laughter near the end is not Lowe, but producer Dave Hassinger.

In complete contrast, "I" -- also the work of Tucker-Mantz, one of the most eclectic songwriting teams of their time, to judge from the manic extremes of their output -- is subdued, brooding, and rather similar to the work of numerous San Francisco psychedelic bands circa 1967, particularly in its sustain-laden guitar leads. "Hideaway" (written by Tulin and Lowe), which like "The Great Banana Hoax" was driven by a compelling bass line, is perhaps the best original in the Electric Prunes catalog. "It was our attempt to synthesize the Indian style with the rock sensibility," says Tulin. "The two major inspirations were 'Paint It Black' by the Rolling Stones and the raga music of Ravi Shankar."

"Big City" (previously recorded by San Jose group the E-Types) is, like "I Happen to Love You," another pop-rock breather from the psychedelic journey. The semi-comic "Captain Glory" is one of the vocals Lowe remembers most fondly, for its "loose, silly," quality. The album ends on a storming note with "Long Day's Flight," garage psychedelia with an improvised feel and some terrific violin-like guitar shimmer and sustain, especially on the fade. The song was co-written by drummer Quint -- who replaced Preston Ritter about halfway through the sessions -- with, of all people, the son of Los Angeles mayor Sam Yorty.

The *Underground* sessions were not the easiest of times for the Electric Prunes. Guitarist James "Weasel" Spagnola also left during the sessions due to illness, replaced by Mike Gannon, who appears on a couple of tracks ("Long Day's Flight" and "The Great Banana Hoax"). The record was not a huge seller, peaking at #172, and did not produce a hit single (although "Dr. Do-Good" bubbled under the Hot Hundred, reaching a measly #128). It was primarily because of those low sales tallies that the third Electric Prunes album (Mass in F Minor, also reissued on CD by Collectors' Choice Music) would not have any original material, but instead be a quasi-religious concept record pretty much foisted upon them by their management/production team.

At least the band were able to write both sides of a non-LP single issued in early 1968 (and included as bonus tracks on this CD). "Everybody Knows You're Not in Love" is as commercial as the Tulin-Lowe songwriting team got, its bouncy California sunshine pop interrupted by a brief brittle solo scrape up and down the guitar strings. It's outshone by the B-side, "You Never Had It Better," a dynamic slab of bluesy psych-pop with more characteristic (and quite ferocious) fuzz and distortion.

As for *Underground*, however, Tulin was pleased with the album, "primarily because we were beginning to have more of a say in what we were doing. However, I was not pleased that a lot of the ideas we had did not/could not come off. We were still learning how to record and thus were at the mercy of our producer's studio 'expertise.' We would describe what we wanted to accomplish and were told how to do it only to find when we were done that it wasn't close. The technology to do some of the things we wanted did not yet exist. Had we known more about recording techniques I think the album would have sounded even better. And, once again, although to a lesser extent [than the first album], there were songs I didn't want to record. However, all things considered, I do believe *Underground* gives a good sense of who we were as a band and where we could have gone." -- Richie Unterberger

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