

# THE ELECTRIC PRUNES

The James Lowe interview

The rock and roll section of Los Angeles' Walk of Fame on the cold annotated concrete of Hollywood Boulevard would be incomplete without a prominent star representing the Electric Prunes. Although they may not have had as many hits as Love, the Seeds, the Doors or the Leaves - other homegrown Smogtown combos from the same era - the mind-shattering strains of the Prunes' "I Had Too Much To Dream Last Night" is enough to forever assure their place in pop music history.

The band had five albums released on Reprise, but only the first two - their self-titled debut and Underground - are truly representative of the Electric Prunes. The third, Mass In F Minor, was an idea that didn't quite get off the ground, and Lowe hit the bricks soon after its release. By the time album five, Just Good Old Rock And Roll, poked its shaggy head out of the nursery, the band was composed of four guys named Moe - with no original members left.

Lead singer James Lowe was never content to take the motorway when he could spend all day poking along on roads that aren't even listed on the map. "I wanted to make free-form garage music," he told me recently, explaining why the Mass album convinced him his tenure as a Prune was up. Though still incredulous that anybody could possibly care about music he created thirty years ago, Lowe agreed to shed some light on a band that's been skulking in the dusty corners of the attics of your mind for far too long.

## **How did you become interested in music as a kid, James?**

When I was about fifteen I went to Hawaii. I'd been raised in West Los Angeles. My dad was in the service, so I was actually born in San Luis Obispo (halfway between LA and San Francisco), but I grew up in West LA. And while I was in Hawaii, I got very interested in Hawaiian music. Up until then, I hadn't seen very many guys actually playing music - being able to play instruments and sing - but there were a lot of guys in Hawaii who were really interested in playing Hawaiian music. It seemed a much stronger part of their culture than it was where I was from. It was a lot of flat key stuff - traditional Hawaiian and Tahitian songs - and a lot of it on uke. It was pretty simplistic, but I was just enamoured with the way people would have a good time with it. It was a lot of fun, singing and playing at these get-togethers. I'd played a little bit of piano before that, but I'd never been that interested in playing music. That's when I wanted to learn how to play the guitar. I bought my first guitar over there, an acoustic that got cracked in the airplane coming back.

## **What other kinds of music did you get into after you got back to the mainland?**

I'd grown up listening to rhythm and blues and from there I got into wanting to play rhythm and blues songs, like "One Kiss Led To Another" or "Young Blood" by the Coasters. I got very interested in the fact that you could play an instrument and sing and be a full ensemble on your own.

## **Do you recall your first public performance?**

I played a little bit with a guy who played banjo and I was on guitar. It was sort of sea shanty/Kingston Trio/Limelites kind of stuff. We actually played a couple of little folk clubs. I don't remember where, Pasadena maybe. We'd go around on talent night, get up and play and make fools of ourselves.

## **Listening to a bluegrass band the other night, I saw a connection I'd never made before: that the Kingston Trio were really bluegrass for the masses - a bit like what Johnny Horton was for Cajun music.**

Right. It's amazing what kind of a pop bridge the Kingston Trio were. They really brought it to the mainstream.

## **Did your folk duo have a name?**

No, if we did I'm sure it was innocuous, and I wouldn't remember what the hell it was.

## **Did the Beatles get you into rock and roll, like everybody else in California?**

Actually, it was a little bit before that. I always liked surf music. For a while I lived down by the Rendezvous Ballroom in Newport Beach,

## **Wow, Dick Dale!**

Right. Dick Dale was a friend of ours. I lived on the peninsula and we saw him play many times. We'd go stomping at the Rainbow, and that was our weekend. Dick had a little shop there, and he was really into delays and echoes and a lot of really cool things. When I was a kid, my parents were really into Les Paul and Mary Ford. And to me, Les was the guy who started all that stuff. Multi-track recording always fascinated me - the sounds he could make. And Dick was the same way. You'd go into his shop, and he'd be sitting there with eight amps all hooked together, playing, and it would be astounding, the sounds he'd be getting out of those guitars. He'd play the Rendezvous on Friday and Saturday nights and just pack the place. He had a band with horns, and Dick was real versatile. He could play drums and he was a trumpet player. He could play everything. And well too, not just get up there and "Sammy Davis" it. I never really thought of it before, but if I really had to say, then that's where I got the fire for a band: from Dick Dale. I'd say, "Look at



the power that music creates. You could move mountains."

### **Did the Electric Prunes sprout from previous band discards?**

The group sort of evolved from a couple of different bands. We had kind of a surf band, I guess you would call it, although I don't even know if we knew it was a surf band. But that's the kind of stuff we were playing - that and attempting to play some blues. Garage band stuff, you know. I think we called ourselves the Sanctions at that point. I know that Mark Tulin was in it at that time, and Ken Williams, our guitar player, and a guy named Steve Acuff...I remember his name but not what he played. I know that eventually he said, "I'm not good enough to play with you guys," and left. I think he played a little guitar.

### **You came along at just the right time to make records. The Byrds and Paul Revere & The Raiders had proved that Mitch Miller's reign at Columbia was coming to an end.**

It was really an exciting time. The coolest thing about it, for me, was all this technological advance coming along at the same time. It was the first time ever that street people had been allowed into the studio to do what they wanted to do - to mangle the records a little bit. Everything before that had been left to these stuffy engineers and stuffier artists.

### **Did the Sanctions become the Electric Prunes?**

We went through a few other members, different combinations of people. We played a few clubs. I was married and had a young child, so I was working the graveyard shift, trying to make the band happen. I wanted to do something to be able to make a living at it. And since everyone else was still in high school, they didn't care whether they made a living or not. They were being supported by their parents. But I'd have to race off in the middle of the last set to work this graveyard job at Rocketdyne, a defense plant, x-raying rocket engines. We'd play this club out in the San Fernando Valley, the Casbah, and most of the guys were under-age, so we'd have to hide that. They'd end up playing the last set without me, because I'd have to punch in on time. We decided at that point that it wasn't worthwhile anymore playing clubs - that we'd still be doing this twenty years from now. That's when we locked ourselves up to just rehearse, and try to get some different kind of a sound so we could record something.

### **Which 60's bands influenced the way you put the Prunes together?**

Well, no one could escape being influenced by the Beatles, and of course, the Rolling Stones. They were always my favourite group. And the Beach Boys. I don't think I can go any further than that - the same people that everyone else was influenced by. And the music scene then wasn't what it is now. Nobody knew how to play anything. People were just learning how to play guitars. Today every young kid is a virtuoso. But back then everybody was just trying to work out chord patterns. For me, I always liked sounds. They always intrigued me. I was just fascinated by making different sounds with instruments and by recording things different ways. In fact, I always wanted to have a band that just recorded and didn't ever go on tour. That Les Paul material was probably the most interesting stuff I'd ever heard. I thought to make a living doing that kind of thing would be unbelievable.

### **Do you remember how the band name came about?**

It came about because somebody had turned us on to a producer, Dave Hassinger, who was looking for a group. We recorded a couple of songs, and we were about to release the record. We were Jim and the Lords at that time, and we didn't want to use that name, but we couldn't come up with anything else. So it came down to: "This is the weekend. We're going to lock you in a room. Either come up with a name by the time you come out or we're going to give you a name (laughs)." The name Electric Prunes started off as a joke, sort of, but with every list of names, that name kept coming back in as a laugh. And eventually it was so strong, I think I just beat everybody into submission. I said, "It's the one thing everyone will remember. It's not attractive, and there's nothing sexy about it, but people won't forget it. Someone asked me recently, "Aren't you sorry you called yourself that?" And I said, "I don't think you'd be talking to me if we'd been Irving and the Quagmires (laughs)." Reprise was incredulous. We had two days of arguing with them over it. They said, "We can't have a name like that." They kept asking us, "What's really the name?" No, no, that was really the name.



*Electric Prunes photo credit: Bob Irwin / Sundazed*

**You recorded a lot of other people's songs. Did you ever meet those song demo legends, Annette Tucker and Nancy Mantz, the people who wrote "I Had Too Much To Dream Last Night"?**

Right, we knew them. Annette Tucker was a friend of this girl Barbara Harris who discovered us. If anyone discovered us, Barbara was the one. We were rehearsing in this garage in the west end of the (San Fernando) Valley, in a place called Woodland Hills. The parents of our bass player, Mark Tulin, had converted their garage for us. They were really nice people. So, this friend of Annette Tucker's was selling a house up the street. She was one of these affluent, attractive housewives who was into music and art. And she happened to come wandering down the street, knocked on the door and asked, "What are you guys playing?" She sat and listened to us for a while and she said, "I know somebody who might be interested in you guys." We thought, "Sure, sure." But sure enough she called back and said this guy's name is Dave Hassinger, and he's recording the Rolling Stones. And we went, "Uh-huh, right." But she brought him to a club date we had. He told us, "You guys are OK, but you've got this problem and this problem and this problem. So work up some things, and we'll meet in a week or two. We met with him every once in a while for a couple of months to play him something we'd done. He was encouraging us to arrange things in different ways, and we were trying to break out of that mold of copying other bands. People said a lot of our things sounded like the Rolling Stones, but we were trying to come up with something different.

**Did you get to watch Dave in action with any of his legendary clients?**

We'd go up to Leon Russell's house to record, because Dave was doing Gary Lewis and the Playboys there at the time. At that time Dave was a staff engineer at RCA, so we'd go down and watch him doing sessions with the Stones or the Monkees. And he was looking to get an act of his own together, so he could break out of the lock-in with RCA. Dave was one of those guys in a v-neck cashmere sweater with a shirt underneath. He looked like he should be playing golf rather than recording the Rolling Stones. Dave actually wound up getting fired from RCA because of us. He tried to shop the record to them, and they didn't want it. Then he went to Terry Melcher at Columbia. Later on, when I worked on the Grapefruit album with Terry, I was kidding him, "Do you realize you turned me down?" (laughs). Dave finally got us a deal with Decca, but that didn't happen, so we ended up at Reprise. Then he got canned by RCA because they thought there was some impropriety about him working for someone else.

**Did you work with Nancy Mantz, the other partner in Tucker/Mantz?**

Nancy was sort of there and not there. I think she co-wrote with Annette long distance. Annette would play the piano and solo the songs for us that way. Or in some cases they would give us a finished demo, like "Too Much To Dream," which had some crooner kinda guy singing it.

**What do you remember about the "Too Much To Dream" session - the big breakthrough?**

We actually cut five or six songs on that session. Of all of them, it seemed to have the most interesting arrangement and seemed to be the one that everybody responded to. We'd already had "Ain't It Hard" out, and that didn't do anything, so we sort of thought that's the way things went. You just kept putting things out, and they didn't do anything. "Too Much To Dream" with a song Mark and I wrote, "Luvin'" on the b-side was released before Christmas (1966) and went through the slag of Christmas. It was on the charts for a long time, just muddling along on the lower end. But it kept building and building, and it finally got far enough off the ground that I got to quit my job, a glorious day. That enabled us to go on tour.

### **How did you adapt to life on the road?**

For us, since we'd spent so much time organizing ourselves and rehearsing, by the time we started playing these ten act touring shows, we could play really well. We played with people like the Beach Boys, the Left Banke and Question Mark and the Mysterians. And it would be fun to see if you could blow 'em off the stage (laughs). We toured probably more than anybody. From the time the record hit we were on the road for three years. Eventually, however, that became a detriment, because we never had enough time to rehearse. You'd wind up doing the same songs you've been doing. And you'd stop thinking about recording new things and start just wanting to go home. It sours you to playing when it becomes just a business. I remember that happening, playing night after night and not even knowing where the hell you were.

### **Did you run across that anti-longhair prejudice so prevalent in the south?**

Yeah, of course we did. We were on the front edge of some of that stuff. I can still remember sitting in a diner in the south - with a sheriff seated two tables away - and this guy's looking at me, saying, "I'm gonna kill you." And everybody, including the cop, was laughing. We were just a band on tour trying to make a living, but because we looked weird, compared to them, we got all that. I remember they told me not to step off the front of the stage in Birmingham, Alabama and don't touch anybody. And I did something they didn't like - getting too close to screaming girls, I think - so this big cop grabs me backstage and says, "You're not in California now son. You're in Birmingham." That's why we were so amazed when we went to England. It was treated more like a business there, and everybody was glad to see us. Here, if you were touring, it was like a bunch of prostitutes just hit town.

### **Any particular memories of clubs you played on the Sunset Strip?**

Yeah, there was this place called The Haunted House. It had a big head out on the sidewalk with smoke coming out of it. And you'd have to walk on the tongue to get into the place (laughs).

### **You toured Europe in 1967. That must have been a kick.**

We ended up staying in England for three or four weeks, and we got an apartment in London, in Harley Street, so we didn't feel so much like guests.

### **I love that Stockholm 67 album that's come out recently, from that same European tour. Sounds like you're at the top of your game.**

Well, actually that was the slide. It was recorded on a bad night at the very end of that tour. We'd played some really crazy stuff and we got no response, so we just went back to playing blues. We were disappointed that people weren't more interested in our more abstract stuff. We'd had so many concerts where people just stood there with their mouths open, so we said, "We'd better just play some blues." It's pretty crude and simplistic, but I guess it's OK.

### **The pictures are certainly great.**

They were done by Gered Mankowitz. I'd always liked his photography on Aftermath and Between The Buttons. So I looked him up, he came to a couple of our gigs, and he agreed to shoot some pictures of us. We went out to Hyde Park on a cold morning and recreated some of his sessions with the Stones. I thought that would be cool, doing put-ons of that stuff, so I asked him if we could go out to where he shot the pictures for Between The Buttons.

### **When did you leave the band? It's pretty unclear from the album evidence. Were you still there for Release Of An Oath?**

No, I bailed before that. We offended the Christians with Mass In F Minor and we I guess we were headed for the Jews and the Buddhists next (laughs). So I just said, "I can't do this anymore." We did the Mass album - an all right idea - but it wasn't really us, although that's what got us on the Pat Boone show (laughs). The first three cuts are all us. After that, Mark played on everything, and I sang everything, but the guitarists were a couple of guys from this Canadian band called the Collectors. We weren't moving fast enough for them in the studio, I guess. But that wasn't the way we were used to recording. And it had gone far beyond what I'd originally wanted to be involved with. It just wasn't what I'd started out to do, which was free-form garage music. I wanted it to be cruder, more home made, and it was just getting way too slick.

*James Lowe was interviewed for the Terrascope by the one and only Jud Cost. Thanks also to David Katznelson and Simon Edwards for their help in getting this together. © Ptolemaic Terrascope, November 1997.*

[Go back to Index](#)