

LINER NOTES FOR THE COLLECTORS' *GRASS & WILD STRAWBERRIES*

By Richie Unterberger

On their self-titled 1968 debut album (also reissued on CD by Collectors' Choice Music), the Collectors had made an idiosyncratic contribution to the wealth of psychedelic music flooding North America in the late 1960s. In its melodies and instrumental/vocal arrangements, the record fused classical and jazz influences with more conventional rock and pop, particularly on the side-long, 19-minute "What Love (Suite)." Their second and final LP, 1969's *Grass & Wild Strawberries*, was an equally unusual recording, though one quite different to its predecessor. For this time around, they collaborated with respected Canadian author George Ryga to provide the musical soundtrack to his play *Grass & Wild Strawberries*, exploring a yet wider range of styles than they had on their first outing.

"I had been writing music for theater productions when I was at university and later on as well, before the Collectors came along," explains guitarist Bill Henderson. "I worked with Joy Coghill, the artistic director of the Playhouse Theatre Company, which was the big theater company in Vancouver. They had commissioned George to do this piece; he had done an earlier piece for them which was his most famous one, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Then he created *Grass and Wild Strawberries*, and they wanted it to be a play with music. Joy connected me up with George to see if we wanted to do this. We started working with him, and enjoyed working with him. We actually played the theater production in [the band's native] Vancouver behind a scrim onstage; we were lit sometimes and not lit other times. So it wasn't a musical, but it was a play with music, and had an actual rock band live on stage. It was probably about a three-week run that the play had; we played it every night."

When they made an album of the music, they'd again be produced by Dave Hassinger, who'd also produced *The Collectors*, as well as working with (as producer) the Electric Prunes and the Grateful Dead, and (as engineer) the Rolling Stones and Jefferson Airplane. "He figured he knew what we could do and wasn't interested in doing less than that, which was pretty neat," says Henderson of Hassinger's contributions. "We were young guys, but we were professional musicians, and really proud of the work we did. We'd do a take, come back in the studio and go, 'No, I was out of tune on that,' or 'I'm a little out of time on that, no, that's not quite right. We gotta go do it again.' So he'd let us do it a few times, and then finally [say], 'Look, you guys. You should take a tip from the Stones. It's not about how perfect you are. When they go out and play, they play until it feels great, and when it feels great, they come back in and say, "Yeah, it feels great." And that's it.' I had never really even thought about that, and he's quite right. You get the one that speaks, and you go, 'This thing rocks, man!'"

"On the second album," Bill continues, "it was George's lyrics that tied it together, and we created a number of different kinds of music to go with those lyrics. We got to do more layering, and it might be a little mushier as a result. What we had in the band was a kaleidoscope of talents and skills, and that had to be managed. I didn't know that. But Dave knew that." There's certainly a kaleidoscope of approaches on the album, from "Things I

Remember," which echoes the Gregorian-like vocal arrangements that had figured so prominently on their debut LP; the grinding, ominous heavy rock of "Teletype Click," where the robotic vocals were created by singing the parts at twice the normal speed and slowing them down; the more conventional psychedelic folk-rock of the title track, embellished by Claire Lawrence's jazzy sax; and the almost Youngbloods-like country-folk-rock of "My Love Delights Me." Occasional recordings gave numbers like "Don't Turn Away" and "Rainbow of Fire" a pastoral feel, while "Seventeenth Summer" -- which would be re-recorded shortly thereafter on the first album by Chilliwack, a group including most of the Collectors -- would sometimes be extended to 20 minutes by improvisations in live performance.

Asked what made the Collectors stand out from many of their contemporaries at a time when so many rock bands were breaking stylistic boundaries, Henderson speculates, "We didn't come from blues, the way a lot of bands did. Some of the guys did; the bass player [Glenn Miller], drummer [Ross Turney], and lead singer [Howie Vickers] all came from blues and R&B. Claire and I, we'd both played rock as well, but we weren't as steeped in the black tradition. [We] came from something different; jazz, classical, and rock. Both Claire and I had some classical training at university. The classical music that the academics were into at that time was what they called avant-garde. We had a lot of influences that were quite analytical and kind of iconoclastic; the whole thing going on in classical music was breaking the old musical traditions.

"We liked that idea, breaking traditions; that sounded like fun, so we did a lot of that. We had this analytical thing; it was an edgy kind of thing, and there weren't many bands doing that. There were bands that were supposed to be experimental, and we were way more experimental than they were. They were on acid, and we were straight, yet we were playing stuff that everyone thought, 'Oh boy, those guys are heads.' But it wasn't that. It was where our minds were, what we were thinking about, and the way we were treating music, which was fairly unusual.

"There was a palette that had a lot of colors on it, and we just went ahead and used them. We would do bizarre things with music that people don't normally do. One of the songs the Collectors did, you had to start it playing it as slowly as you possibly could, the slowest tempo possible. And then the idea was to gradually speed it up over the period of the song in a way you didn't really notice it was speeding up, but by the end, it had to be going as fast as you could play. I remember some writer from, I think it was *Rolling Stone*, saying, 'Are you guys really into Jewish music?' Because he heard us doing all these" -- here he breaks off to sing a melismatic line much like a cantor might in synagogue -- "and we loved that stuff. Claire had a real passion for that kind of soul."

The Collectors would not create another long-playing recording after *Grass & Wild Strawberries*, however, although they did do some work for soundtracks on Canadian films, as well as music for the Canadian Pavilion at the World Exposition in Osaka, Japan in 1970. "We could have gone a lot of different directions," reflects Henderson. "On that first album, there was a sound. I think we lost momentum on the second album because there wasn't, and not only that, it wasn't the same sound; whatever it was, it was different. There was a stream in the Collectors that was growing -- the improvisation stream. We would do it a lot, and we preferred it to writing, actually, 'cause it was writing in the moment. It was where Claire and I were going, big-time." They would keep going in that direction in Chilliwack, whose first lineup was mostly identical to that of the Collectors, the difference being the departure of Howie Vickers, which reduced the quintet to a foursome.

Summarizing his experience in the Collectors now, Henderson adds, "I was a lot younger then, and didn't realize the value of what we had started, if we could continue it. If we could somehow work from a similar template, just try to stay within this vibe that we'd created, especially with the first album. I know that if we could have done that, the band would have really gone on, and I think done really, really well in continuing those kind of traditions. There are bands that did do that, and it worked for them. But in my own mind, it was, 'I got something else I want to do, boom, let's do it.' Not thinking about building a career, thinking about kind of expressing my musical ideas." Not that Bill's done too badly out of building a career out of music -- he became the mainstay of Chilliwack, recording numerous albums with the band, with whom he still tours, as well as working in record production and composing for film, television, and theater (check his website, www.gonegonegone.com, for more info on his present and past activities). And now with the CD reissues of their two albums, twenty-first century collectors can finally hear the Collectors -- the band, that is. -- Richie Unterberger

contents copyright [Richie Unterberger](#), 2000-2010

unless otherwise specified.

[HOME](#) [WHAT'S NEW](#) [MUSIC BOOKS](#) [MUSIC REVIEWS](#) [TRAVEL BOOKS](#)

[LINKS](#) [ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#) [SITE MAP](#) [EMAIL RICIE](#) [BUY BOOKS](#)