

# CONFESSIONS of a POP CULTURE ADDICT



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SAM TWEEDLE – THE POP CULTURE ADDICT

Sam Tweedle is a writer and pop culture addict who has been entertaining and educating fans of the pop culture journey for a decade. His writing has been featured in The National Post, CNN.com, and Filmfax magazine.

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## Whats Purple and Goes Buzz Buzz?: A Conversation with The Electric Prunes' James Lowe

Sam Tweedle: *The Electric Prunes* are one of the great 60's groups that sat on the fringes of the rock n' roll scene.

James Lowe: Well, I was surprised that anybody knew about us when we came back and started playing again.

Sam: Really? Why is that?

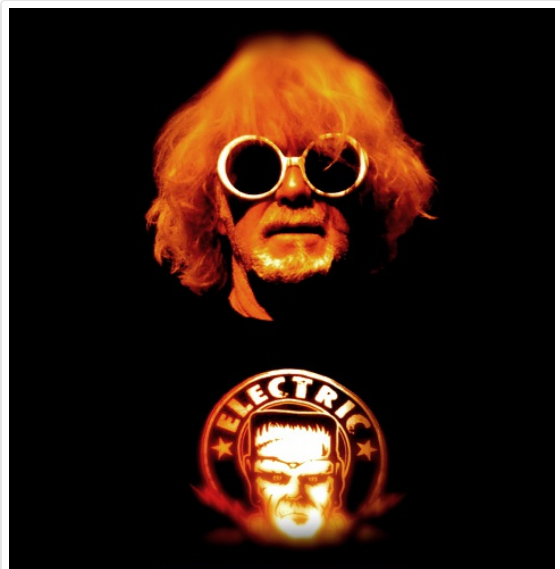
James: I think essentially because the people that we were involved with made us feel that what we did, when we did it, was a failure. So I never admitted that I was in *The Electric Prunes* for a lot of years. [The label] expected us to be like *The Beatles* and sell a lot of records, but we didn't do that. I'm kind of surprised that we have fans.

Sam: Well I always put *The Electric Prunes* in the same league with some of the era's cult favourites, like *The Velvet Underground* or *The New Colony Six*.

James: (Laughs) Well I'll buy that if you say it, Sam.

Sam: How does it feel now to know that *The Electric Prunes* do have this following?

James: When somebody tells you, "I was in this car with this girl when I heard your song" or, "I remember buying my first motorcycle and listening to you guys going down the highway" then I realize that music ties itself into your life when you hear it. It sort of coordinates itself with certain activities, and forever reminds you of that moment. So that makes me feel good. That, and when we play live. A lot of fathers come with their sons. I think that's cool. I wouldn't go with my Dad to listen to his music!



"I was surprised that anybody knew about us when we came back and started playing again.... I never admitted that I was in *The Electric Prunes* for a lot of years."



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Sam: Well, what was your Dad listening to?

James: Big band stuff, but at the time we wouldn't have even been close enough to do something like that. Now to see some kid that is twenty-seven or twenty-eight coming to a concert with their Dad is cool.

Sam: What were your early influences in music?

James: Well my Mom turned me on to playing the harmonica, and little things like singing harmonies and stuff. I went to Hawaii right after high school, and that's a very musical place. Everybody was playing the ukulele or something. I actually started going around with a friend of mine and playing *Salty Dog Blues* and stuff at these little clubs as something to do on the weekends just to get free drinks. I liked *The Beach Boys*, just like everybody else did, but I liked the old blues artists the most. I had a friend who played really good blues guitar, and he showed me all these little tricks. That actually spurred my interest, and when I got back from Hawaii I tried to put a band together.

Sam: *The Electric Prunes* were started in LA around 1965. How did you guys all come together?

James: Well I know this drummer guy, and I asked him, "Do you know anybody who would want to play in a band?" He was very young, and he said that he knew a couple of guys who went to high school with him around the block who would like to play. So Mark Tulin, Ken Williams and I got together and that was actually the beginning of the band. They were much younger than I was. I was actually married and had a child. They were doing it for different reasons than I was doing it. I was doing it to get out of going to work everyday if I could. But Mark and Ken got in a lot of trouble for doing it. They got in trouble for growing their hair long, and they couldn't graduate with their class because their hair was over their ears. That was Taft High School, and was the same high school that the guys from *The Strawberry Alarm Clock* went to. So we started in Mark's garage, and we decided early on to get a recording deal. To heck with playing bars and clubs and stuff, we wanted to find something that would perpetuate this in a way that would mean something. We rehearsed six or seven days a week. For a couple of hours we rehearsed. It was amazing how much they stuck to it.

Sam: 1965 and 1966 were really exciting years for music in Los Angeles, because you had artists like *The Doors*, Frank Zappa, *The Byrds*, *Sonny and Cher* and *The Association* playing local places like *The Whiskey a Go Go* and *The Troubadour*. Were you influenced by any of these groups? Or, were you too focused on doing your own thing?

James: We were trying to stay away from that. We were a stones throw from Hollywood, but we were trying to stay away from other bands because we didn't want to end up being like everybody else. We wanted to make it something a little



"When somebody tells you, 'I was in this car with this girl when I heard your song' or, 'I remember buying my first motorcycle and listening to you guys going down the highway' then I realize that music ties itself into your life when you hear it."



Before they called themselves "The Electric Prunes," the group went by Jim and the Lords: "(Mark Tulin and Ken Williams) were much younger than I was. I was actually married and had a child. They were doing it for different reasons than I was doing it. I was doing it to get out of going to work everyday if I could. But Mark and Ken got in a lot of trouble for doing it. They got in trouble for growing their hair long, and they couldn't graduate with their class because their hair was over their ears."





Pete Forde  
Wizard World

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different. I certainly went and saw *The Byrds* when they played on the strip. We went and saw *Love* play at *Frito Rito's* a lot. It was a great time. There was always somebody out there looking for a band. The promoters were out there looking and you could actually do something.

Sam: Before you called yourselves *The Electric Prunes* you were called *Jim and the Lords*. I love that name.

James: (Laughs)

Sam: Was that a play on the novel *Lord Jim* by Joseph Conrad?

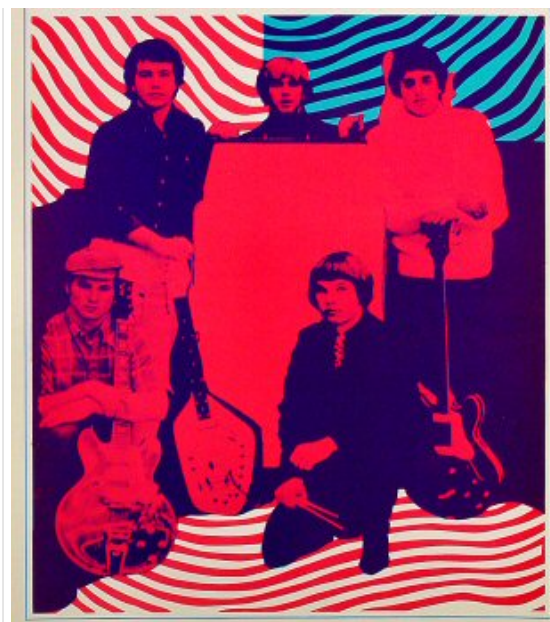
James: People thought it was. (Laughs)

Sam: Well where did you come up with the name *The Electric Prunes*?

James: Well we changed *Jim and the Lords* because I didn't like separating myself from the band. I wanted to be in the band. So we knew we were going to come up with another name when we got a record deal. It came to the point where we were about to put a record out with Reprise, and we had a weekend to come up with a final name. On Monday they were going to start printing things. So we locked ourselves in our rehearsal room and we were trying to come up with something. You know how you just start writing things down, and everything is on a piece of paper? Well, somebody told a joke. "What's purple and goes 'buzz buzz?'" The answer was, "an electric prune." We started laughing about it and I said, "What a great name that'd make for a band." So we put it on the list, and we kept coming back to it. You know how you get giddy after a while? Well when we came out at the other end of it on Monday, the producer came by and we said we were called, *The Electric Prunes*. He absolutely hated the name. He said, "I can't go to Warner Brothers with that name!" So he was doing a recording session with *The Rolling Stones* and he mentioned to them, "Look what these guys want to call themselves, *The Electric Prunes*." Well *The Stones* said, "That's a great name!" So Dave Hassinger came back to us and said, "By the way, Warner Brothers love the name, but I told them I thought of it." (Laughs)

Sam: How did you guys get signed to Reprise?

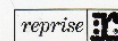
James: Well, we actually had a deal with Decker originally, and Warner Brothers wanted to do



"We were a stones throw from Hollywood, but we were trying to stay away from other bands because we didn't want to end up being like everybody else. We wanted to make it something a little different. "



THE ELECTRIC PRUNES



"Somebody told a joke. "What's purple and goes 'buzz buzz?'" The answer was, "an electric prune." We started laughing about it and I said, "What a great name that'd make for a band.""



something with us. But they didn't want to sign any independently produced acts. They wanted to have the act. Well Dave Hassinger was looking to build himself an empire, so we were going to be the first act that he had signed, so they put us on Reprise. They put Jimi Hendrix on Reprise too.



"I always wanted to be a studio band. I wanted to just stay at the recording studio because that was my interest. I didn't want to play live."

Sam: So if you were trying to stay out of the clubs, did you guys ever become a good live band?

James: Well, when the record came out, we realized that we had to play live. I always wanted to be a studio band. I wanted to just stay at the recording studio because that was my interest. I didn't want to play live.

Sam: Your biggest hit, *I Had Too Much to Dream Last Night*, is one of the coolest songs to come out of that era. Were you happy with the success of that song?

James: We were happy with it. Everybody says that it was our hit record, but back then nobody thought it was a hit. We cut six different songs when we cut that, and people would come in and listen to it and say, "That's the weird one. It's nice, but where are you going to get someone to play something like that?" At that time, AM radio was the only place you could get a song played. Who was going to play something with such a weird opening? It sort of struggled. It was released at Christmas and it took a long time to make it up the charts. When we released it, after a month or two, we thought it was a failure and nothing was going to happen with it. But it kept inching its way up the charts. It got to number eleven, and I think it would have gotten higher if it had been released at a different time, and if we could have ever reached New York with it. We had everybody else, but we couldn't get New York. They said it was too strange.



"(I Had Too Much to Dream (Last Night)) was released at Christmas and it took a long time to make it up the charts. When we released it, after a month or two, we thought it was a failure and nothing was going to happen with it. But it kept inching its way up the charts."

Sam: And New York is such a normal city.

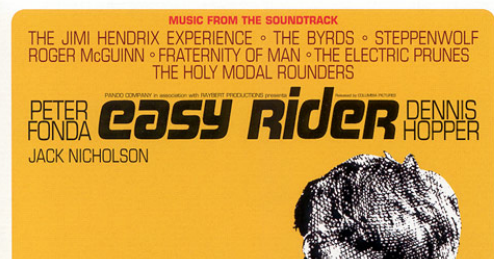
James: (Laughs) Go figure. You could get a thirty eight ounce drink, but you couldn't listen to our record!

Sam: So do you remember when you found out that *I Had Too Much to Dream Last Night* hit the charts?

James: Yeah. We got called up one day and they said, "You've got to go out to Seattle because your record is on the charts up there." So we flew up to Seattle and we were driving from the airport to the hotel and the song came on the radio. We pulled over on the freeway and started punching each other. (Laughs)

Sam: You guys even got on the *Easy Rider* soundtrack! That's pretty monumental. How did that happen?

James: I've got to be honest with you and admit that I have no idea how we got on the *Easy Rider* soundtrack. I just went in one day and they said, "Oh, by the way, your



song is in this movie.” I didn’t know what the movie was. I didn’t see it. I was surprised about that.

Sam: Now you said earlier that you saw *The Electric Prunes* as being a failure. But you must have had people coming out to your shows? You must have had groupies? You must have seen a fan reaction?

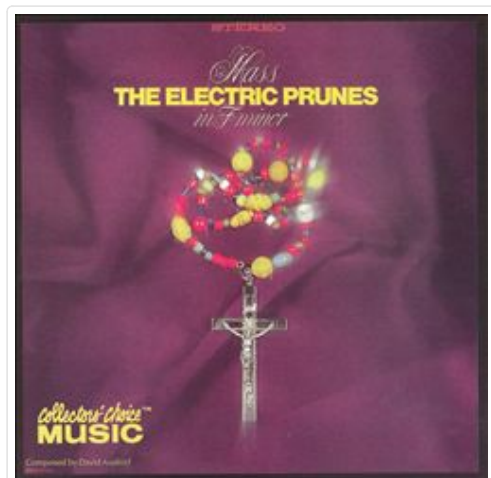


“I’ve got to be honest with you and admit that I have no idea how we got on the Easy Rider soundtrack.”

James: Yeah. People liked us. It wasn’t that. I’ll tell you what it was like. If we were on the road with a road manager, the road manager would call in and tell the manager that we didn’t wear these outfits that they had picked out for us. It was like we were little children being driven around, and I was the only adult. I was constantly telling the rest of the band that they work for us. We don’t work for them. That’s what eventually took us apart. It eventually became [the managers] meddling too much, and trying to divide the band between me and the rest of the guys.

Sam: Now the story goes that you guys finally broke up over *Mass in F Minor*. What’s the story behind that?

James: Well, the reasons we broke up are the same as other bands. You’re not getting paid enough, you start arguing internally and the ship starts coming apart from the inside out. The *Mass in F Minor* album was a composition by David Axelrod, who was producing people like Cannonball Adderly and Lou Rawls. Good people and he was kind of a jazz musician. He came up with this *Mass* idea and presented it to our manager, who was also his manger. That’s how we ended up recording the *Mass*. We didn’t know it was going to be charted. The whole thing was charted and our guys were garage musicians. They weren’t people who knew how to hit beats on a chart. Mark Tulin was the only guy who read music. The whole band played everything, except Ken Williamson on the second side. We brought in some guy who could play off of a chart better than Ken could. We got kind of frustrated because they thought we were taking too long, but if you take a bunch of greenhorns and try to get them to do something sophisticated with something that isn’t our own composition, it’s going to take a while. And it wasn’t just us. We got some guys called *The Collectors* to come and play on it. Some people say we didn’t play on it, but all of our guys played on it. But then *Newsweek Magazine* [reported] that Dave Hessinger had just done *Mass in F Minor* with *The Electric Prunes*, and next he was planning on doing *Madam Butterfly*. Well I read that and I said, “That’s it. I’m out of here, man. I’m not doing anyr *Madam Buttefly*.”



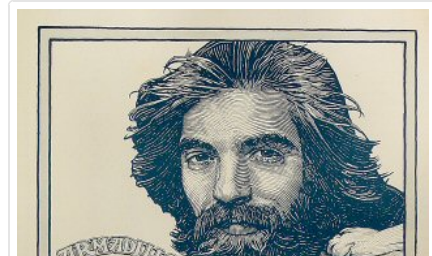
The Electric Prunes classic LP “Mass in F Minor” would prove to be the final straw for the original line-up of the group: “Newsweek Magazine [reported] that Dave Hessinger had just done Mass in F Minor with The Electric Prunes, and next he was planning on doing Madam Butterfly. Well I read that and I said, “That’s it. I’m out of here, man. I’m not doing anyr Madam Buttefly.” “

Sam: So what are your personal thoughts on *Mass in F Minor*?

James: Well it’s actually better in retrospect. I had some funny feelings about it then because it got in the way of our band, and everybody took it to mean that we had gone religious. They didn’t look at it as a musical composition. They looked at it like as if we had become Christian musicians or something. So it kind of threw a curve at us. You know how they tell you not to confuse the audience? I think it did. It did more damage than good. But in retrospect, listening to it, it’s not too bad. It’s okay.

Sam: Now explain to me the whole thing with “The New Electric Prunes.” How does some entirely different band with no connection to you end up getting your name?

James: When I left, because I was the one they always had to deal with, the producer told me that Reprise had put a lot of money into us and had not gotten it back yet. They wanted to





know if they could still use the name. I said, "Sure". I didn't plan to use it anyway, so I told them to go ahead and use it. I could understand how they needed to get their money back, but I didn't know what they meant. I didn't know that they were going to put together a whole new band. The rest of the band had stayed, and they put Kenny Loggins in the band. But then the rest of the guys quit. So [Reprise] decided to cook up another band. So they created a whole new band that had nothing to do with our band. Nothing whatsoever. I don't know if when they went out to play if they even played any of our songs.

Sam: When you figured out what they had done, what was your reaction?

James: I didn't have any. When I walked away from the band, I walked away. For ten or fifteen years I didn't look back. I produced other records. I didn't care about *The Electric Prunes*.

Sam: So after *The Electric Prunes* you went into producing?

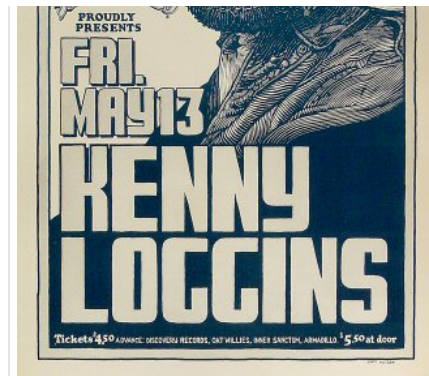
James: Yeah. That's what I wanted to do when I got into the *Prunes*, and I was able to put myself into that position with the band, so it worked out perfectly.

Sam: Who were some of the people you were working with?

James: Todd Rudgren, Nazz, Sparks, Arlo Guthrie, Randy Neumann, Glen Yarborough and a lot of Warner Brothers' people.

Sam: So what were the circumstances that brought *The Electric Prunes* back together in the 90's? *The Electric Prunes* aren't the sort of band that you'd ever expect to resurface.

James: (Laughs) Sam, what you are asking is, "Why?" Somebody got a hold of us and said that Warner Brothers wanted to put together a retrospective album out of us. So I said, "I can't imagine who would buy it, but sure." So I went back in and remixed all the old stuff off the original four-track. I had Mark come in and do it with me since we had written most of the stuff together. Well, we started listening to the original tracks and they didn't sound too bad. I had a little recording studio at my house, so we thought we would play a few things together. Well before you knew it, we were laying a few things down and recording. We offered everybody that was in *The Electric Prunes* to come back and play, but it turns out that the moron in 1967 is still the moron in 2000. Some people made it with us, and some didn't. Ken Williams came



After The Electric Prunes broke up Reprise formed The New and Improved Electric Prunes featuring Kenny Loggins: "They created a whole new band that had nothing to do with our band. Nothing whatsoever. I don't know if when they went out to play if they even played any of our songs."



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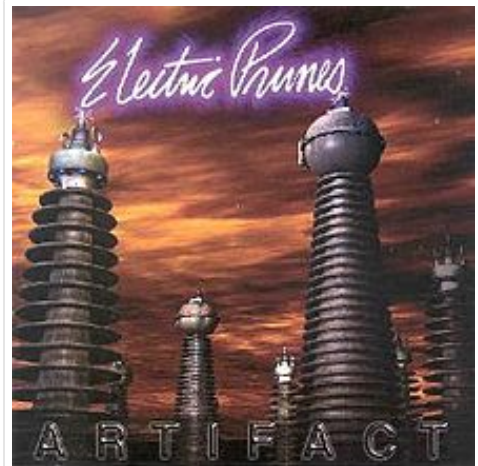


In 1999 The Electric Prunes shocked the world when they reformed: "We offered everybody that was in The Electric Prunes to come back and play, but it turns out that the moron in 1967 is still the moron in 2000."

back and played. Quint came back for a little while and quit. He was always quitting the band. So we were able to put together the core of people who started it, and we had never been in other bands, so everything came out the same. It was the only thing we could ever do, and it was the only thing we could play. We couldn't play any other way.

Sam: So was that when you finally realized the cult following you guys had?

James: Actually, Steve Van Zandt, the guitar player for Bruce Springsteen's *E Street Band*, called me on the telephone and said, "I dare you to come back here to New York and play." (Laughs) He said, "I give you one year to come out here." So in that year we recorded an album at my place and then we went out to New York and played. That was when we realized that there were people out there listening to this music. Remember that when we grew up, rock music was a fad. It had no value whatsoever. Everybody said, "Rock n' roll is going to be over in a year." I remember them saying that with Gene Vincent and Elvis Presley. It was sort of weird to me that the music had had its own identity. It had legitimated itself.



In 2002 The Electric Prunes released "Artifact," their first album since "Mass in F Minor" featuring the "real" Electric Prunes: "It was sort of weird to me that the music had had its own identity. It had legitimated itself."

Sam: What is the current status of *The Electric Prunes*? I know that there was a big shake up with the group after Mark passed away in 2011.

James: The band is still together. We just released a live show from Stockholm which we recorded in 2004. We have at least an album in the can that Mark and I did. We haven't mixed it yet. So that will probably happen. We want to play some live dates too. We'll see.

Sam: What can you tell me about the album that you haven't released yet?

James: Some of the things are stuff that we didn't fit on the three albums that we've done since 1999. We had been writing stuff for a new album. Mark was singing more on some of this stuff. He was doing an album with Billy Corrigan right before he died. We had been up there and recorded a few things with Billy, and he came and performed with us live. We also did a few of Billy's songs. His songs will probably be on it. And we recorded a few new things that will be on it too. It's the same stuff. There are some goofy cuts and the same way it always is.



Although the sudden death of Mark Tulin in 2011 put a massive whole in The Electric Prunes' organization, a new album of material produced by Lowe and Tulin is on the horizon: "We had been writing stuff for a new album. Mark was singing more on some of this stuff. He was doing an album with Billy Corrigan right before he died."

Sam: What's the album going to be called?

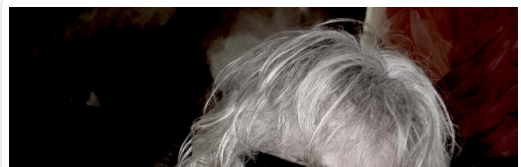
James: I don't know at this point. *It's Over*? I don't know. (Laughs)

Sam: Any idea when it'll see the light of day?

James: Well I have to go back to California. I imagine it'll come out in March of 2013.

Sam: Any other musical projects that you're working on.

James: No. This is a time for reflecting. You start wondering when you go into these things if your



albums are just cluttering the record store. There are more people playing music now than there ever was. People from all over the world and some really good stuff too. I'm amazed how good the stuff is.

Sam: So do you think *The Electric Prunes* is clutter?

James: We could be if we stay at the party too long.

Sam: Or, you guys could consider yourself the Godfathers of Garage Rock.

James: Well, maybe so. Maybe the best thing is to not reveal too much so people don't find out that you're just a guy like them.


The sudden death of Mark Tulin in early 2011 unquestionably left a massive hole in *The Electric Prunes* organization which is still being felt. While the future of the group may still be in question, with the promise of more unreleased material on the horizon, there is still more to come from *The Electric Prunes*. The irony is that in their current reformation, *The Electric Prunes* have lasted over a decade, while the original group broke up after only five years. Not bad for a group that once considered themselves to be a failed endeavour. *The Electric Prunes'* story proves that you can never dream too much. Sometimes it's just rediscovering that niche audience that continues to embrace you and realizing that truly good music will always find its place.



"This is a time for reflecting. You start wondering when you go into these things if your albums are just cluttering the record store."



**POP CULTURE ADDICT NOTE:** Big thanks to our good friend, the lovely and amazing Giddle Partridge, for suggesting this story and hooking up with James Lowe. A close friend of the late Mark Tulin, Giddle Partridge is helping keep pop culture alive with her unique world vision. Thanks Giddle for all you do.

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Giddle Partridge with James Lowe and Mark Tulin,

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**James Prune** on February 28, 2013 at 6:05 pm

Thanks Sam .... boy do i sound dumb!!! ha ha KEEP-A-ROCKIN' mon.  
FYI We are at <http://www.electricprunes.net> jAMES



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