

LINER NOTES FOR THE ELECTRIC PRUNES' *I HAD TOO MUCH TO DREAM (LAST NIGHT)*

By Richie Unterberger

Few rock singles are as simultaneously experimental and commercial as the Electric Prunes' "I Had Too Much to Dream (Last Night)." That was obvious right from the opening hook: a slowly swelling, backwards burst of fuzztone tremolo guitar, announcing the record's arrival like a supersonic bee swooping into your speakers. And few hits jam so many ideas into three minutes. There are those violin-like distorted washes of guitar backing hushed vocals that explode into anguished near-screams; sudden dead-air stops, punctuated by lonely groans suggesting descents through the earth's crust; and spooky guitar reverb complementing the drifts between blissful dreams and waking nightmares.

The backbone of the track, for all its oddness, is a catchy pop-rock melody, which got the disc all the way up to #11 on the national charts in early 1967. It was a strange, compelling record, enshrined as a permanent classic when Lenny Kaye chose it as the opening track for the *Nuggets* compilation of 1960s garage psychedelia. It was also the taster for an impressive, though erratic, debut album that would continue to mix pop, blues, and garage rock with exotic combinations of psychedelic sounds and effects, with results ranging from desultory to thrilling.

With singer James Lowe, bassist Mark Tulin, guitarist Ken Williams, and drummer Michael Weakley (aka "Quint"), the Los Angeles group had prefaced "I Had Too Much to Dream" with a fair 1966 garage-pop single, "Ain't It Hard"/"Little Olive" (included on this CD as bonus tracks), which just hinted at the brilliance of their next effort. Following the debut single, Quint was replaced (temporarily, as it turned out) by Preston Ritter, and guitarist James "Weasel" Spagnola came aboard to make the Prunes a quintet.

Although the group were already writing and recording original material, for the second single, producer Dave Hassinger would call upon two outside songwriters, Annette Tucker and Nancie Mantz. Their "I Had Too Much to Dream Last Night" -- unbelievably, considering the final version -- was originally written for orchestra and piano, as a much more middle-of-the-road pop arrangement. The Electric Prunes made *sure* it sounded much different, starting with the snippet of deliberately wiggly backwards guitar that opened the track.

"We were recording at Leon Russell's house, and you couldn't see the studio from the control room," recalls Lowe. "We were recording on a four-track, and just flipping the tape over and re-recording when we got to the end. Dave cued up a tape and didn't hit 'record,' and the playback in the studio was way up: ear-shattering vibrating jet guitar. Ken had been shaking his Bigsby wiggle stick with some fuzztone and tremolo at the end of the tape. Forward it was cool. Backward it was amazing. I ran into the control room and said, 'What was that?' They didn't have the monitors on so they hadn't heard it. I made Dave cut it off and save it for later."

Unlike many of the garage-psychedelic bands enshrined by *Nuggets*, the Electric Prunes came up with a follow-up that was just as great, although "Get Me to the World on Time" (written by Annette Tucker with Jill Jones) didn't do quite as well on the charts, reaching #27. After another mesmerizing opening burst of distorted sounds -- this time sounding like distorted pulsating violin-guitars -- Lowe pushes the song into psychedelic territory with his unforgettable urges to go higher and higher, building from a whisper to a scream. Even by the exaggerated standards of 1960s garage-pop, "Get Me to the World on Time" boils over with hormonal lust, accentuated by the sudden break into a pulverizing psychedelic Bo Diddley beat. The sweaty tension never stops mounting, gliding into an instrumental tag with a nerve-shredding rising oscillating tone, as if the group are boarding a spaceship to take them into an unimagined psychological and sexual stratosphere.

"The beginning of that song is Dave Hassinger groaning through a mic, into the tremolo on a Fender amp," reveals Lowe. "It creates pulse-like overtones that sound like strings." Adds Tulin: "The 'spaceship' at the end was created by riding the high E of a guitar up to the last fret, where we matched the note with an oscillator and had it take off from there. As far as the Bo Diddley beat, we were definitely aware of using it. That beat is an atavistic rhythm."

On the one hand, much of the album built around the two hits was admirable in eclecticism, its resemblance to the singles insured by having Annette Tucker (usually with Nancie Mantz) supply much of the material. "Are You Loving Me More (and Enjoying It Less)," with its dramatic stop-start tempos, and "Try Me on For Size," on which the band sound like a way-out-there Paul Revere & the Raiders (with Rolling Stones/ *Aftermath*-style marimba, no less), were additional tense, sex-charged rockers. (Note how much the stuttering low tones that start "Are You Loving Me More" resemble those that start Pink Floyd's "Astronomy Domine," released a few months later.) "Sold to the Highest Bidder" is just plain nuts, with its Greek tempoed-guitars sped up to sound like ukuleles, and a blurry swoosh near the beginning produced by "spinning something on a drumhead for three-and-a-half hours, slowed down," according to Lowe. "It was supposed to represent a coin or something."

On the other hand, there were fruity Las Vegas-vaudeville-style numbers ("About a Quarter to Nine," "Tunerville Trolley"), mediocre baroque pop ("The King is in the Counting House), and a sentimental teen pop ballad ("Onie," which like "Are You Loving Me More" has lead vocals by Weasel). To the group's frustration, only two of their original compositions were used: "Luvin'," a bluesy number that sounds rather like an outtake from the Stones' *Aftermath* (which Hassinger had engineered), and the impressively jazz-psychedelic "Train to Tomorrow," whose instrumental coda, with Ken Williams' lead guitar, was inspired by Wes Montgomery.

It is incredible that Annette Tucker and partners could be responsible not just for the brilliance of "I Had Too Much to Dream (Last Night)," but also for the lunacy of "Sold to the Highest Bidder" and the camp drivel of "Tunerville Trolley." Observes Lowe, "Most of their material sounded like it was written for a female vocalist. I felt a bit uncomfortable with some of it, but at the time we couldn't write anything as commercial, so we just did it. I knew Annette and she really enjoyed her craft. We always had a laugh at the variety and scope of the images. They were lusty bitches."

Adds Tulin: "We had nothing resembling freedom, let alone total freedom, in our selection of songs. Consequently there are definitely songs that I believe do not belong on the album and were, in fact, a waste of our time and energy. There were several other ideas we were working on, but [we] realized there was no use pursuing them because they too would have been 'too weird.'" One of those songs that Dave Hassinger judged too strange, "Hideaway," would be a highlight of their second album, *Underground* . And that story is continued in the liner notes to the Collectors' Choice Music CD reissue of that record.... -- Richie Unterberger

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