

LINER NOTES FOR THE FREE SPIRITS OUT OF SIGHT AND SOUND

By Richie Unterberger

In mainstream pop music history, the search for the first jazz-rock fusion group usually zeroes in on the late 1960s. That's when white rock groups such as Electric Flag and Blood, Sweat & Tears started using jazzy horn sections, and when greats like Miles Davis and John McLaughlin played jazz with acid rock-influenced guitar parts. Even before this, however, a New York group had truly drawn almost equally from jazz and rock, rather than dress up one of the styles with trimmings from the other. And although the Free Spirits made just one album, *Out of Sight and Sound*, it makes a strong claim as the first jazz-rock LP ever released, even if it was virtually ignored when it initially appeared.

While the passing of forty years has dimmed recollection of the exact dates and circumstances, it's likely the Free Spirits formed around spring of 1966 in New York, where most of the band was living in a dilapidated building on the Lower East Side. Guitarist Larry Coryell had just moved to the city from Seattle to try and make it in the jazz scene, while drummer Bob Moses, tenor saxophonist Jim Pepper, and bassist Chris Hills all came from jazz backgrounds. Only rhythm guitarist Columbus "Chip" Baker, who'd played in folk coffeehouses, was coming from outside the jazz world, though Coryell had also played some rock and R&B back in the Northwest. But it was a time when rock and pop were becoming overwhelmingly popular among America's youth, particularly with the rise of the Beatles and the British Invasion. So it was that although none of them were hardcore rockers, the Free Spirits determined to play rock music by fusing it with their own roots, much as there were no real rockers among the Byrds when they had formed and made their own fusion with folk-rock.

Says Coryell today, "I got to the city, and all this rock'n'roll, blues, and pop music was just as popular as jazz. I got into the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan. We were all into the Beatles. The world was into the Beatles! I was not pursuing jazz stuff exclusively. I was doing everything, and a lot of that included trying to write songs. I wanted to try to create a new type of music that would express my generation. I was imagining what it would be like if John Coltrane met George Harrison." Confirms Moses, "It was really Coryell that got me over whatever prejudice I might have had about rock. I have to credit Larry with really making me take rock'n'roll seriously."

"Coryell was the most technically advanced guitar player around, comfortably playing all the R&B/rock and jazz styles, even combined," enthuses Hills. "Pepper had a unique harmonic concept, a wonderful sound, and had his wonderful Indian heritage. Moses somehow rhythmically merged the diverse influences of world percussion, R&B, and jazz, including [the great jazz drummers] Ed Blackwell, Elvin Jones, Rashied Ali, and beyond. Columbus was the anchor and best human being, providing a much-needed supporting role in a band of soloists, and contributed many wonderful lyrics. My distinction was to be one of the first to improvise jazz/rock bass lines, creating a spontaneous groove that was responsive to all the players.

"Columbus, who hadn't much playing experience, and I had the sometimes quite difficult task of holding it all together. Unlike the other bands that all played arrangements and did minimal amounts of improvising, we had minimal arrangement and mostly improvised performances, which would always include elements of the most extreme jazz avant-garde. We scared a lot of young girls and people in general. We were well aware that we were doing something different, essentially combining pop and jazz. I, for one, usually felt like we were 'getting away with something,' even if we just played some soul jazz tune at a dance club. We wanted jazz to be accessible. Coryell did wonders with that, quoting current pop songs in his solos."

Although the Free Spirits could and would go into some free improv onstage, their original material was at the outset quite oriented toward songs with vocals, albeit with adventurous jazz elements in the unconventional structures, melodies, tempo changes, and arrangements. "It was a genuine marriage of different minds," says Baker, who wrote much of the material with Coryell, of their songwriting collaborations. "I would bring some lyrics to Larry and say, 'Got any music for this?' He would write some chords to it, and I would come up with a way to sing it. That's what we did with 'Girl of the Mountain'; he and I wrote that in an afternoon. Larry and I just found a way to make these songs come to life."

Even in such an era of musical barrier-busting as 1966, the Free Spirits sounded like no other band around, and quickly made an impact in their New York gigs, many of them at the Scene club. As to how they landed their deal with ABC Records, as Larry remembers, "I was a protegee of [the great Hungarian jazz guitarist] Gabor Szabo, and he had a contract with ABC. He wanted to put some of us guys in the Free Spirits on his record. We got to the record date late, so we didn't make the record. But Bob Thiele, the producer, took a look at us and decided to sign us right on the spot."

Confirms Chris, "We rehearsed and were to be on [Szabo's] Jazz Raga album, which has [drummer] Bernard Purdie, [guitarist] Bob Bushnell, and Jack Gregg [a friend of Larry's] on bass. It was supposed to be a double guitar trio, two guitars, a jazz drummer, and an R&B drummer, electric and acoustic bass. The day of the recording, we were in a fancy midtown rehearsal studio waiting to do an audition for some people that didn't show up. Our managers were holding us there when we needed to go to the recording session. Larry actually asked us what we wanted to do, and I, for one, gave him the authority to make the decision. He decided to wait, and we showed up at [Rudy] Van Gelder's studio after they had been recording for a while. Gabor wasn't happy, of course, and finished the album without us. He overdubbed sitar later."

Thiele had been involved in jazz recording since the late 1930s, as well as working with early rock'n'roll stars Buddy Holly and Jackie Wilson. By the 1960s he was the main man at the ABC/Impulse jazz label, producing the most influential, popular albums by John Coltrane, as well as LPs by cutting-edge modern jazz innovators such as Archie Shepp, McCoy Tyner, Charles Mingus, and Yusef Lateef. According to Free Spirits manager Ted Gehrke, the Free Spirits were so eager to work with Thiele that they turned down a deal from Elektra producer Paul Rothchild. Adds Chip, "The signing of the contract was strongly influenced by Bob Moses's parents. Bob's dad said, 'If you guys don't sign this contract, you won't stay together. If you want to remain a band, you should sign this contract. If you don't, you'll blow apart.' And he was probably right. When I look back on it, I'm amazed that we were together for sixty days! If we had not a project to do together, what we were doing had kind of come to an end. We were just hanging out and playing together"—less than thirty gigs in their entire time as a band, by Gehrke's estimation.

In the event, however, the ABC affiliation would turn out to be sorely disappointing for the band when Thiele produced their *Out of Sight and Sound* album. "Thiele was such an enormous pain in the ass," chides Baker. "This autocratic senior citizen of the jazz world who had produced records by John Coltrane, and here we were recording in the same studio at [engineer] Rudy Van Gelder's place in New Jersey. And this guy treated us as though we were fleas. I remember one afternoon we were recording, at the end of 'Tattoo Man,' and Pepper leaned over into his saxophone mike. He had this really deep voice, and he said, 'On your skin.' Bob Thiele came out of the control room like a hornet, started screaming and cursing at us and telling us that we didn't get to do that at his studio when he was producing, and 'you act right or we'll have your ass out of here.' Just the most ridiculous kind of tirade."

Adds Moses, "There was one tune—we were recording it, and I actually got lost or something, or I dropped a stick. I stopped playing—there's a pause in it where I dropped out. But somehow the band kept playing, and I picked up my stick, and I kind of recovered. I said, 'Well, I might as well finish the tune, it's practice anyway. Obviously we're not going to use this take.' Thiele said, 'That's the take.' I said, 'What are you, crazy? It was completely messed up. I stopped in the middle.' 'That's alright, it's good enough. I don't care, nobody cares. It's just rock.'"

Reflects Hills, "My 20/20 hindsight is that in our attempt to get a record deal with them, we disguised our true nature. In a sense, we tried to appear to be just another pop group. During auditions, we certainly weren't having long unaccompanied screaming tenor solos joined by totally free percussion! But, of course, when we got in the studio, we wanted to be represented as we really were, when what had been presented to them was some toned-down playing of nice tunes that were essentially not very radical. Perhaps some of the lyrics were—I remember the president of ABC telling us not to say 'mutha' in 'Blue Water Mother.' I couldn't tell if he was kidding or not. However, they must have acknowledged our connection to jazz since they gave us Thiele and Van Gelder, who had recorded the best in jazz, including the extreme avant-garde. But unfortunately they didn't have much of a feel for what we were doing. Frankly, I think they were unhappy to be making a pop record and were just trying to please ABC, making decisions that changed our approach to songs, creating some very heated moments between the older men and the young artist egos. My main complaint was that they added a ton of reverb to everything."

For his part, Gehrke remembers ABC insisting that no song should exceed three and a half minutes, "because that's what pop records have to be," though onstage many songs lasted fifteen minutes or more. Which leads into Chip's favorite Jim Pepper story: "When we were recording, we were out at the parking lot at Van Gelder's one day, and Pepper said, 'I don't know what it is with this three-and-a-half-minute shit. I want to stick it in and leave it in a while.'"

Although all the guys in the band make their dissatisfaction with the production clear, they retain affection for the songs themselves. "I loved 'LBOD,' I loved Moses's lyric," declares Coryell. "'Angels Can't Be True,' if it was recorded by a popular singer like John Pizzarelli or Peter Cincotti, the kind of voice that's in vogue today, I think that song stands on its own very well. It's got all kinds of jazz vocabulary." Baker especially likes one of his collaborations with Larry, "Storm": "I thought that was a very pretty song. [Coryell] left out a verse because he couldn't think of a way to get it onto music." For his part, Hills says, "I always liked 'I'm Gonna Be Free.' It's a very simple but strongly emotional song—I think it's a classic. As I recall, it was one of the songs we felt weren't done justice on the record. The live version got very intense." Coryell plays sitar on this track, observing today, "I loved Indian music, and was influenced by all the records I was hearing that Coltrane had trumpeted. He had talked about how much he loved listening to Ravi Shankar. None of us had money, we had no work, so we'd sit around and get loaded and listen to Indian music."

"Girl of the Mountain" had special meaning for Larry, as it "was written for my first high-school sweetheart, back in Washington State. She got pregnant from me when we were both still in high school, and that child was given up for adoption as a little girl. My girlfriend went out to Missouri with some grandparents, all the shame and disgrace associated with that, to have the kid. I wondered about that kid for almost forty years, and the kid found me. The kid had no idea that I was a musician, or what I had done, or anything like that. Now she lives in Denver, she's married, she has a kid that's my grandson, and we all get along famously."

Undoubtedly the most unusual track was "Blue Water Mother," which had two lead vocals singing two entirely different lyrics—a rarely-employed device anywhere in popular music, then and now. "I wrote these lyrics, I think I'd taken some acid or something," recalls Baker. "Larry had a set of lyrics that was as incoherent and wacked-out as mine. We used to get on different sides of the stage, and each of us would sing our set of lyrics at the same time. Thiele refused to split the tracks on stereo; he said he wasn't doing any trickery on his album. What a jerk!"

Everyone's agreed that a February 22, 1967 tape of the band live at the Scene (on which they're joined for a few numbers by esteemed jazzmen Gary Burton, Dave Liebman, Randy Brecker, and Joe Beck) captures a much truer picture of the group than the ABC LP does. "Basically, we'd play the chorus of a song that we had written, and then we'd jam on it for an hour," laughs Coryell. "We were doing some really radical stuff," elaborates Moses. "We would often start our sets with a ten-minute unaccompanied sax solo, completely free, just wild Indian screaming from the deepest gut. People would be mesmerized. And probably just at the point where they were thinking, 'gee, what is this, I didn't come here for this,' we'd crank into some serious Chuck Berry groove, and people would go nuts, man, they'd be screaming." Laughs Baker, "The fact that we couldn't play as well as John Coltrane, McCoy Tyner, Elvin Jones, and Jimmy Garrison didn't mean we didn't play as long. We'd start to play and turn it over to one of the soloists, and we'd back him up 'til he got tired of playing. It was well before any of the people who, on a much less harmonically complex basis, began to play rock'n'roll in that same improvisational manner."

While the Free Spirits might not have been around long enough to play many gigs, they certainly did some interesting ones. Gehrke remembers them opening for the Doors, Jimi Hendrix, and the Velvet Underground; Hills even recalls hopping onto Moses's drum kit, uninvited, to play along with the Velvets at one show, "playing free around what they were doing. Actually the drummer [Maureen Tucker], she seemed to enjoy it." Baker remembers how actor Lou Gossett Jr. "used to get off his gig on Broadway and come sing standards with us," as well as playing at Lincoln Center ("we were on right after Mayor [John] Lindsay"), the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Filmmakers' Cinematheque. Felix Cavaliere of the Rascals sat in with them, and Baker feels that trumpeter Randy Brecker, in "his structuring [of the] Blood, Sweat & Tears concept, came up with many of his ideas from the nights that he spent with us onstage at the Scene. And god knows, he gave me more ideas than I ever gave him!"

Complete with liner notes by Nat Hentoff (one of the most esteemed jazz critics of his day), *Out of Sight and Sound* probably came out in early 1967. It certainly came out no earlier than December 12, 1966, as an LP acetate of the record exists bearing that date (though according to Gehrke, when they were sent an acetate of the finished LP mixes, they were so upset that they stood in a circle, put a hand each on it, and snapped it before sending the broken pieces back to ABC). "We hated it," admits Coryell. "We were all disappointed. We were idealists. We wanted perfection." Hills, however, questions "whether things would have been that different if we had been allowed to be in control—which would have been very unusual, of course. I don't think ABC would have liked or promoted it any better, but it would've been a more important documentation of the band." ABC didn't totally lose out with the Free Spirits, though; as Coryell points out, "the Free Spirits record was a failure, but the other records I made with Bob Thiele were relatively important records in his catalog."

The record certainly wasn't heavily promoted by the label, given how hard it is to find a copy today (though, oddly, ABC did release a picture sleeve 45 of two cuts from the LP, "Tattoo Man"/"Girl of the Mountain"). "It's very easy to get overlooked in a big company like ABC," adds Chris. "It's also quite possible that their point of

view was, they took a chance, spent some money for a record, didn't see much potential in the finished product, and wrote it off." ABC did actually try one more time with the group with the non-LP single "I Feel a Song" (backed by the same version of "Storm" that appears on the album), recorded at Bell Studios in midtown New York. But that single—now added to this CD reissue as a bonus cut—became the rarest Free Spirits release of all. Although it had a more accessible soul-pop flavor than anything else they recorded, the session was dampened (in Baker's memory) by a conflict between Thiele and the band's friend David Baker, brought along to help with the production/recording side.

In any case, Larry Coryell left the Free Spirits shortly after the LP came out to join vibraphonist Gary Burton's band, as did Bob Moses soon after that. The Free Spirits did carry on without them, replacing Coryell with organist Lee Reinoehl and replacing Moses with James Zitro, Hills moving to guitar and taking a greater songwriting role. Changing their name to Everything Is Everything when they signed with Vanguard, their late-'60s album included the small hit single "Witchi Tai To"—a song that Hills is "sure we would have recorded" had the original Free Spirits lineup managed to endure longer.

As to how the Free Spirits might have developed had the original personnel enjoyed a longer lifespan, Coryell muses, "We would have definitely gotten into more of the freedom type of improvisation that involved jazz and all the other influences that were contemporary at the time—avant-garde, rock, blues. The record that Moses made [in the late '60s], *Love Animal* [on which Coryell and Pepper also play]—that's where we were heading." Moses, though, remains frustrated that the Free Spirits didn't fully realize their potential on vinyl: "I think we could have made a record that would have had the songwriting craft of like, say, the Beatles or the Stones, really classic, hooky melodies. 'Cause we were writing tunes like that with a guitar player as mean, and maybe even more musical and well-rounded, as Hendrix, with a sax player that's as deep as Ornette Coleman and Coltrane in Jim Pepper. Can you imagine a group like that, with songs that are as classic pop as the Beatles or Stones, with Hendrix playing guitar and Coltrane playing sax or something? C'mon! It would be something unbelievable, never heard before, and could have been incredibly successful." Baker simply states: "You'd think that that kind of talent marshaled into one place would have found some avenue for continuation. But people in the record industry didn't get it."

After *Everything Is Everything*, Jim Pepper went on to record on his own and with other jazz players before his death in 1992. Happily, all of the other Free Spirits are still with us and doing well. Coryell, of course, is one of jazz's most famous and influential guitarists, with his autobiography (tentatively titled *Guitar Man*) scheduled for publication in 2007. Moses has recorded prolifically under his own name and with other top jazz musicians, and also teaches at the New England Conservatory. Hills has recorded as part of numerous jazz and R&B projects, most famously *Players Association*, who had a Top Ten UK hit in 1979 with "Turn the Music Up!" Baker left professional music a few years after the Free Spirits, and is now a writer-producer for corporate television.

And with the passage of time, they view the LP more fondly than they did when it was first released. "When I listen to it now, I love it," says Coryell. "I hear a bunch of young people trying to get their careers started. I was experimenting. I was trying to be a songwriter and a singer, and I hardly played any lead guitar at all. I was still trying to find a way to express my talent at the time. I hear a great tenor player in Jim Pepper, and Bob Moses, his drumming, it sounded so good." For Baker's part, "The wonder of having been involved with so many other musicians of tremendous promise who have carried their careers along so that everybody could hear that music, I'm certainly grateful for that. I know that we were the only guys doing what we did."

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