

TAMBOURINES AND 12 STRINGS
The Secret History of Roger McGuinn

By Steve Redhead



Professor of Sport and Media Cultures at the University of Brighton
Steve Redhead is Head of the Research Student Division in the
Chelsea School where he directs research into Mobile Accelerated
Nonpostmodern Culture (MANC). He has published fourteen
books including *The Jean Baudrillard Reader* (Edinburgh
University Press, Edinburgh and Columbia University Press, NY,
2008), *Paul Virilio: Theorist For An Accelerated Culture* (Edinburgh
University Press, Edinburgh and University of Toronto Press,
Toronto and Buffalo, 2004), *The Paul Virilio Reader* (Edinburgh
University Press, Edinburgh and Columbia University Press, NY,
2004) and *Repetitive Beat Generation* (Rebel Inc/Canongate,
Edinburgh, 2000). He is editor of Berg's *Subcultural Style* book
series.



In 1965 the first Byrds album *Mr Tambourine Man* was recorded in Los Angeles. For twenty-five years speculation abounded about who played what, when and where. In the early 1990s a bootleg CD appeared, straight from the mixing desk in the studio. Byrds' outtakes from 1965 to 1967 'Tambourines and 12 Strings' is mainly an instrumental record, mostly devoid of vocals, of the band's early studio exploits; it is, in effect, the 'secret history' of the inimitable sound of the guitarist, songwriter and vocalist Roger McGuinn – a bootleg of recordings of songs which made up the first three official Byrds albums, *Mr Tambourine Man*, *Turn! Turn! Turn!* and *Fifth Dimension*.

Mr Tambourine Man the album, featuring the Bob Dylan song Mr Tambourine Man, was released in August 1965 in England but its actual recording process is still shrouded in mystery. McGuinn (Jim, then eventually Roger), and his famed 12 string Rickenbacker, was there at the recording of the first album, but much of the sound was down to others. Instrumentally Chris Hillman (bass), Michael Clarke (drums), Gene Clarke (vocals) and David Crosby (guitar), founder members of The Byrds, are



nowhere to be heard on the backing for Mr Tambourine Man, the classic single. The session musicians playing as 'The Byrds' included Hal Blaine on drums, Larry Knechtel on bass and Russell Bridges (aka Leon Russell), Ray Gerhardt engineered and Terry Melcher produced. The voices heard on the bootleg CD are Melcher's and Gerhardt's, echoing from the control room. 'That was groovy Jim' and 'the idea, Jim...the track should have everything going when we fade', 'start it off... slow, Jim', 'Hal, do that pick up on the snare and do it heavy' and so on.

The tracks (multiple takes and all) on 'Tambourines and 12 Strings' are listed for posterity:

I Knew I'd Want You (Take 1)

It's No Use (Take 6)

Bells of Rhymney (Take 2)

I'll Feel a Whole Lot Better (Take 2)



It Won't Be Wrong (Take 8)

The World Turns All Around Her

Satisfied Mind

Set You Free This Time (Takes 1-8)

Stranger in A Strange Land (Takes 1-2)

Wait and See (Takes 24-28)

Oh Susanna (Take 1)

5D (Fifth dimension) (Takes 1-7, and 12)

It's all Over Now Baby Blue (Takes 4-5)

Mr Tambourine Man (Takes 4-6)

Listening today to say Stranger in a Strange Land (both takes, no vocals) the genesis of jingle-jangle global popular music for the next forty years unfolds before our ears. The basis of the sound of Starry Eyed and Laughing, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, The



Smiths, REM, The Bluetones, The La's, Maximo Park and many more are there in this one template. It could have been any of them, rehearsing without their singers. Recently Roger McGuinn did a short solo tour of the UK, giving concerts at medium sized venues like the St Albans Arena and The Lowry in Salford. The concerts are the ones he has been giving for the last few years, featuring the 12 string Rickenbacker electric and a 7 string Martin acoustic especially made for the ex-Byrd. The make of guitar is commercially available from Martin guitars as the Martin 7HD. The idea came about when airlines damaged his twelve string guitars in transit. The McGuinns (Roger and Camilla, his wife and manager) now travel by sea! The myriad songs on the tour range from My Back Pages to I'll Feel a Whole Lot Better, Eight Miles High, Mr Tambourine Man and Chestnut Mare, through a Leadbelly classic here and a Bob Gibson gem there, to the elegiac, entrancing McGuinn/McGuinn penned closer May The Road Rise To Meet You. They are played stupendously on both guitars and punctuated by anecdotal information about McGuinn's life, particularly the period from age 13 in Chicago to the end of the Byrds in the early 1970s. The narratives beautifully underscore the music. 'Singing songs and telling stories' McGuinn enchants the audiences with his hundreds of 'back pages'. What we never get to

hear about though is what went on in the Californian studio in 1965 – what happened there to make up the ‘secret history of Roger McGuinn’ and the instantly recognisable sound of the Byrds.

Part of McGuinn’s legacy can be heard on his own ‘folkden’ website www.folkden.com which, remarkably, has been going for the last fifteen years, with occasional CD output. He adds a digital



version of his performance of a folk tune (with written lyrics) each month, keeping the folk tradition alive in these modern media times. The songs, sometimes recorded with other luminaries (such as Pete Seeger or Judy Collins), are, though, distinctively from McGuinn’s own unique sonic literature – forged, originally, in the white heat of the studio some forty-four years ago.

Acknowledgement

All photos by Tara Brabazon, Professor of Media, University of Brighton.

Further Media

Books:

Rogan, Johnny (1997) *The Byrds: Timeless Flight Revisited - The Sequel*. London: Rogan House.

DVD:

Roger McGuinn, *Live At The Basement*

Website:

www.folkden.com