

## **WE'RE ON OUR WAY: TEN APPLE ARTISTS YOU MAY NOT HAVE HEARD**

Apple Records may have deteriorated by 1975 into a Beatles-only solo label, but the company really did try to cultivate a garden of distinctive and gifted artists in the early days.

We've already discussed some of those artists, such as Badfinger, Doris Troy, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Trash, the Radha Krishna Temple, Mary Hopkin, James Taylor, and Jackie Lomax in the book...but what about the rest?

### **THE ELASTIC OZ BAND**

Lennon and Ono attached their names and talents to plenty of liberal causes in the early 1970s. One was the London-via-Australia magazine *Oz*, which was found to have been "pornographic" (a decision later reversed in the British courts) in 1971 and scheduled for shutdown.

During a July 14, 1971 John and Yoko press conference, Lennon sang "End of the Road" as a tribute to the magazine. A subsequent issue of *Oz* contained a thin plastic record of the song.

J&Y originally wrote the rocking but hardly earth-shattering "God Save Us" and demoed it during the *Imagine* sessions, then agreed to give the song to the struggling magazine's legal defense effort. Meanwhile, former Beatles roadie Mal Evans, trying to put together a roster of artists for Apple, thought that Newcastle singer Bill Elliott would be a perfect fit for "God Save Us."

As a result, the Elastic Oz Band, a parody name referring to the Plastic Ono Band, was "formed." Lennon and Ono wrote a new b-side, "Do the Oz," but the 45, produced by Lennon, Ono, Mal Evans, and Phil Spector, stalled completely on release. Elliott would continue his Beatles connections several years later (see Lon and Derek Von Eaton).

### **CHRIS HODGE**

Both Yoko Ono and Ringo Starr have been credited with bringing Hodge to the Apple label. The handsome songwriter's first single, "We're on Our Way," was actually a moderate hit in the U.S. for Apple, reaching a surprising #44 on *Billboard's* chart in early summer 1972.

Hodge's rugged voice worked well with his interesting, commercial, rather Beatlesque material, which ran the early 70s gamut of progressive and glam rock with some psychedelic influences. "We're on Our Way," a forgotten classic blessed with a science-fiction lyric, even contained flourishes of sitar, a rather outré choice for the time.

A follow-up single, “Goodbye Sweet Lorraine,” flopped, though, and Hodge released no further material for Apple. He did have three more singles issued on the RCA and DJM labels, but essentially has vanished into the void.

## **THE HOT CHOCOLATE BAND**

Jamaica-born British singer Errol Brown and a group of musicians decided to cover Lennon’s “Give Peace a Chance” in 1969, but wanted to alter some of the lyrics. Needing permission to do so, the group sent a demo of their version to Apple—and Lennon loved the record enough to ask permission to release it.

Apple secretary Mavis Smith is credited with naming the young aggregation The Hot Chocolate Band.

Released in fall 1969, a reggae-tinged “Give Peace a Chance” was a complete flop—certainly less successful for Brown’s group than for Lennon—and turned out to be the young band’s only Apple product. Try finding one of these discs now.

Like some other Apple acts, bigger and better things came for the group once they departed from the label. The group soon shortened its name to Hot Chocolate, hooked up with hit-making producer Mickie Most (Herman’s Hermits, Donovan, etc.) and began racking up chart successes in the U.K.

After penning “Think About Your Children” for Mary Hopkin, the band’s musical reach stretched across the Atlantic. 1974 saw the uncharacteristically dark “Emma” become their first American hit. The following year, their deathless “You Sexy Thing” scored big, and went on to become ubiquitous in film soundtracks, notably in 1999’s *The Full Monty*.

## **DAVID PEEL**

The folk-singing Peel happened into John Lennon’s orbit when the former Beatle and Yoko arrived in New York City in 1971. Peel was among the cadre of lefties (Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman, etc.) hanging around the Lennons who provided them some NYC street savvy and benefiting from a symbiotic relationship.

Finding Peel’s anti-authoritarian dope ditties (“Have a Marijuana,” etc.) rather funny, Lennon signed him up to Apple. The Beatles’ label released Peel’s third album, 1972’s *The Pope Smokes Dope*, which featured Lennon and Ono’s Phil Spector-inspired production and some musical assistance.

Peel’s songs on the LP celebrated J&Y, Bob Dylan, the Chicago Seven, and the dope-and-politics lifestyle. Two promotional 45s were also sent to radio stations, including

“Hippie From New York City” (a response to Merle Haggard’s anti-hippie “Okie From Muskogee”) and “F is Not a Dirty Word.”

Peel, his band the Lower East Side, and John and Yoko also played “Hippie From New York City” during a 1972 episode of the *David Frost Show*. Lennon included him in the lyrics to “New York City” from the otherwise disastrous *Some Time in New York City* LP.

If one prefers not to listen to Peel’s records (he’s still writing and recording to this day), one can experience him on video in a raucous 1972 appearance on the *Mike Douglas Show* during the week that John and Yoko co-hosted the program.

## **RAVI SHANKAR**

George Harrison’s input at Apple included production, songwriting, and A&R work. One beneficiary was his hero and onetime sitar teacher Ravi Shankar, who was featured on two Apple albums: the soundtrack to the 1971 film *Raga* (released only in the U.S.) and the double-album *In Concert 1972*, in which Shankar appeared with sarod master Ali Akbar Khan and tabla player Alla Rakha, considered one of the all-time greats.

In tandem with George’s own “Bangla Desh” single, Ravi released a 7-inch record himself on the Apple label, the *Joi Bangla* EP in 1971. The releases paved the way for the *Concert for Bangla Desh* in bringing attention and much-needed funds to refugees of the famine brought on by floods and political turmoil.

Despite their quality, and Harrison’s sensitive production, none of the releases sold much. In addition, many people used Shankar’s appearance at the Concert for Bangla Desh as an excuse to step out and powder their noses...but those who appreciate Indian classical music were happy to hear his well-produced, thoughtful Apple works.

## **RONNIE SPECTOR**

Despite the animosity between Phil Spector and Paul McCartney, the former was hired as director of A&R at Apple Records in 1971.

That spring, he and George attempted to get Phil’s wife, Veronica “Ronnie” Spector, back into the charts. The Harrison-penned “You,” recorded during the *All Things Must Pass* sessions, was earmarked for the former Ronette, but she was less than taken with the somewhat fluffy composition. (In 1975, George dusted it off, re-cut the vocal himself, and scored a minor hit with it as a single from his *Extra Texture* album.)

Better results were achieved with the folky, charming Harrison-written “Try Some Buy Some.” The single reached #77, but that would be Ms. Spector’s only Apple release. Two years later, she and Phil separated, and they divorced in 1974.

Never one to waste good work, Harrison visited the indignity on Ronnie Spector of erasing her vocal track for “Try Some Buy Some” in early 1973 and replacing it with his own, putting the final product on his *Living in the Material World* album. (A year later, John Lennon would crib the descending melody line and, as he freely admitted, parlay it into “#9 Dream” on his *Walls and Bridges* LP.)

## **JOE SOUTH**

Part of Elvis Presley’s latter-day Nashville posse, South wrote hit songs “Down in the Boondocks” and “Hush” for Billy Jo Royal, then enjoyed a huge hit of his own in 1969 with the electric sitar-festooned country-gospel ballad “Games People Play.”

South’s Beatles connection came with the fall 1971 release of the soundtrack to the film *Come Together*. “Games People Play” kicked off the first side of the album, while the Dells’ version of “Love is Blue” headed side two. The rest of the disc contained incidental music, most of it penned by Stelvio Cipriani.

## **THE SUNDOWN PLAYBOYS**

A six-piece Cajun band that had been performing in Louisiana since 1945, the Playboys hardly seemed the stuff of Apple.

They released their “Saturday Nite Special” 45 on the local Swallow label in 1972. The band’s teenaged accordionist, Patrick Savant, a fan of rock as well as of Cajun music, sent a copy of the record on a whim to the Apple offices in London...and the label bit, deciding to put out “Saturday Nite Special.” George Harrison supposedly made the call himself to Savant to talk business.

In September of 1972, Apple released “Saturday Nite Special,” but the song (which exists only in mono) tanked and is now quite a valuable commodity—both on 7-inch and on an illogical, but charming, 78 rpm 10-inch release.

## **JOHN TAVENER**

It is said that modern classical composer John Tavener’s brother, a building contractor, was working on Ringo Starr’s house...and eventually set up a meeting with the Beatle. Tavener was already becoming well known in the music community for his outré, flower-power-y classical recitals, and after a meeting with John and Yoko, signed to Apple in 1970.

Tavener’s 1966 piece *The Whale*, which involved among other aspects a chorus, amplified percussion, and tape loops, was chosen for release on Apple in September

1970. This, and the U.K.-only Apple 1971 release *Celtic Requiem*, are two of the label's more obscure releases.

Apple's foundering prevented further releases on Apple, but Tavener went on to a long career teaching and composing, often exploring the mysteries of spirituality. Years later, Tavener's "Prayer For the Healing of the Sick" was recorded for the 2000 modern classical tribute CD *A Garland For Linda*, in honor of Linda McCartney.

Sir Paul also admitted that Tavener's mystical, spacious work influenced the composition of his oratorio *Ecce Cor Meum*.

## **LON & DEREK VON EATON**

Brothers Lon and Derek Von Eaton got their start in the New Jersey band The Trees. Following that band's breakup, the two sent a raw but promising demo to Apple Records—and were signed. George Harrison again was prime in finding this act for the label.

Going to England for the first time and recording in such a professional environment was literally mind-blowing for the guitar-toting brothers. The two released an album on Apple in September 1972, *Brother*, as well as a 45, "Sweet Music." Neither the single nor LP were successful, despite the quality of the Von Eatons' 11 original songs or the production, courtesy of Beatle friend (and sideman) Klaus Voormann.

After this album, the Von Eatons shifted to A&M Records, but never had the big hit they hoped for. They did continue to work as session men on albums by George and Ringo, however, and reunited to record "Apple of My Eye" for a Badfinger tribute.

Harrison later tried again to apply his magic touch to Splinter, another two-man aggregation he signed to his Dark Horse label. The group was originally considered for Apple, but Harrison decided to form his own company and took Splinter with him. One of the two singer/guitarists in Splinter was a young man named Bill Elliott.