

Little Feat: Still Out There Among the Great Unknown Bands



Clancy Mann

A canceled act topped Feat on the marquee: "The humbler, though, was that the guy spelled our name wrong"

BY STEVE MOORE

"Who are these guys?"
—Interested Spectator

BERKELEY.—Despite three excellent albums, Little Feat remains one of the great unknown bands of our time. And their recent appearance here at the Keystone Berkeley was, according to their songwriter and lead guitarist Lowell George, about typical.

They were billed with Bonnie Raitt. She had canceled out days ago, but her name stayed on the bill due to promotional sloth and even topped them on the marquee. "The humbler, though," said George, "was that the guy spelled our name wrong." He "h"ed and shook his head. "For some reason," he said, "we've been dubbed an underground band, which is, unfortunately, synonymous with unknown. But I've seen 17,000 people get up and scream and jump around or whatever you're supposed to do at those things."

Through what they describe as a process of elimination, George, formerly a singer and guitarist with Frank Zappa, and pianist Bill Payne began to play together. Richard Hayward, the drummer, finished up an album for the Fraternity of Man and joined. So did Roy Estrada, also from Zappa's group. After the second album, Estrada left to play with Captain Beefheart. The band now is Paul Barrere, guitar, Sam Clayton, congas, Kenny Gradney, bass,

and Hayward, Payne and George.

"Basically we were L.A. players who did studio work and toured with bands under the figurehead of the material we're currently being asked to perform," Lowell George said. George, a breath of fresh air in an age of stylish, serpentine lead guitar players, is a bright, slightly acerbic deadpanner who tends to speak at great length and in complete sentences. "We backed up Bonnie Bramlett, Bonnie Raitt, Judy Mayhan and some others, but not much came of it. Then the group got itself together and we haven't really done a backup gig until the last tour. I'm producing Bonnie Raitt's album now in L.A., and some of the guys are playing, but she has her own bass player so that precludes a group deal. But we have a situation coming up that brings back memories: The band will be backing up Bonnie Bramlett during the week, and I will be in L.A. doing Bonnie Raitt's album. Then on the weekend I change Bonnies and we do Little Feat for some really nice shows back East."

George began as a songwriter with "Willin'," which was cut by Johnny Darrell and the Sunshine Company. It allowed the group to get on Warner Brothers. The song appears on the first, two Little Feat albums because most of the guitar work on the first version was done by Ry Cooder. "I was building a model airplane and I cut my finger and

couldn't play. Ry was just finishing his first album and came over and did it. It has a lot of Cooder in it, beyond the mere instrumentation. The second, ten-set, minimal, is a Little Feat tune with no question.

"I felt very strongly about that first album in many ways. There were two main areas of contention. First, it was done too fast, and there were some major disagreements with Rust [Title, the producer]. It was the first record he ever produced, and he wanted very much to be a part of Warner Brothers. He wouldn't let us in the studio for the mix. Then when he got to a certain point in the budget he wanted to slip it off, and he brought things to an abrupt halt. I had some other questions in my own mind as well. Ry was getting twice what we were, and a group album is more pricey than a solo album. I wondered: 'Why is he allowed all this room for experimentation and why isn't this group allowed the same thing?'"

"The answer, I suppose, is in the situation that record companies create, a fact that was pointed out to me by Van Dyke Parks, who has opened my eyes to a lot of things. Warner Brothers makes an effort, though I can't say it's valiant. It's a giant card game wherein they try and decide how many records a certain group can sell and then they set out and try and sell that many. In our case it was just not as many as we might have

hoped for. In a way I understand. If you have a Black Sabbath that has a platinum record the week before it's released, it's an easy situation and they jump on it. Somewhere along the line the Bandy Newmans and the Ry Cooders and the Little Feats are somehow accommodated, but these people mean hard work and they shy away from them."

Van Dyke Parks has done more than just point out the facts of business to George. "I was working on 'Sailin' Shoes.' I had some verses and I had pieces of the chorus but nothing was happening with it. Van Dyke came in and said, 'Okay, let's play it,' and we sat down. He was at the piano and I had a guitar. We tried it once and then he said something to me—I can't remember what it was—and there was a flash of light and I had it. It was a Zen experience. It was an approach I never believed in before, but it was what gave me enough courage to go in and do 'Roll Um Easy' all by myself, with just a guitar." It was the first time George had ever played the song all the way through, and it has convinced him of the reality of "record magic being in live performance." It was probably a two-way experience though, because Parks included "Sailin' Shoes" on his own album, *Discover America*.

"I think 'Roll Um Easy' is the tune that is most fully realized on *Dixie Chicken*. A large part of it was Danny Hutton, the background vocals. He had just come back from a tour and he was leaving that night for Japan. He was totally wasted, which was the perfect condition for that song. What you hear is certainly not what you'd expect from something like Three Dog Night."

A distinguishing element about Little Feat's albums has been their jacket art. It's done by one Neon Parks—Marty Miller—a former resident of San Francisco who "used to be called Jefferson Airplane but somebody stole his name for another project." Neon Parks has done the *Sailin' Shoes* and *Dixie Chicken* covers as well as Zappa's *Weasels Ripped My Flesh*. George said that when producer Ted Templeman showed *Sailin' Shoes* to Van Morrison he commented: "How can you work with these guys? That's the most revolting thing I've ever seen in my whole life." George said, "I heard that and I said, 'That's great. We're really onto something here.'"

With the artistic success of "Roll Um Easy" in mind, plans are to do a live album or at least a live-oriented album with live vocals and a minimum of overdubs. "Then occasionally a monstrosity like 'Kiss It Off.'" The tune is an uncivil look at the Chief Executive, there-in known as "Milquetoast-Hiller." The tune, written a few years ago, has become somewhat timely, of course. "We're adopting World War II philosophy as well as World War II technology, obviously. And like Hitler, none of the people around the man are professional statesmen. He's not truly a dictator, but that's the 'milquetoast' part. He does have people frightened. He speaks and everybody jumps and you can tell who is who from whether they jump right or left."

The kid had been working with an English-style band in Iowa. He sat up when George stepped to the Keystone microphone and asked: "Anybody know where Mario Savio is?" Silence. Who? "He went shit-on-a-stick up the street here a few years ago. Wonder what happened to him? It was pretty interesting." Then he went into "Two Trains Running." The kid began to grin. "They did 'Dixie Chicken' and he leaned over and asked, 'Who are these guys? We don't hear too many bands like this in Iowa. Like none.'" By the time the band got to "Fat Man in the Bathtub" the kid was beside himself. "Bonnie Raitt gonna play?" "I was thought not." "Oh well, I think I'll dance."

Bill Payne kicked off "Tripe Face Boogie," and the kid moved around, bending over tables to see who'd truck with a kid from the Breadbasket.

BRIDGING THE GAP WITH BLUEGRASS IN VIRGINIA

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Revival. "Over there, they want to boogie."

Despite lifestyle differences among the members of the audience at the main stage, there was no trouble until Sunday night, when a glass beer bottle broke at the feet of Eddie Adcock of the Hind Generation. "I'll meet whoever that was after the show," Adcock vowed.

The bottle could have come from someone who was trying to throw it into the lake along with the others already dumped there, but the atmosphere became tense. The Country Gentlemen, scheduled to go on next, didn't want to go on the main stage but said they would go on the second stage.

Charlie Waller said, "There's nothing wrong with freaks, and there's nothing wrong with rednecks. There's just no communication between them. Bluegrass was beginning to bridge that gap. But you'll never bridge it with rock music."

Waller and his group played a set at the main stage, and then Brain Bowers, a young autoharpist, went on. "We're going to do something we used to do in Sunday school," Bowers said. He got everyone to stand up and play a game of going up and down to the "eight" words in "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean." He led the group in other songs and finally said, "Let's have this place together for one minute. Join hands

with your neighbor." People joined hands, and Bowers began to sing "I was standing by my window . . ." the opening line of "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" The audience was brought together and remained so until the music stopped early Monday morning.

"Harmonica" Flank Floyd, an old-time musician who holds and plays a harmonica in his mouth, plays guitar, and sings simultaneously, said: "In the Thirties, I used to ride trains and hitch all over the South to play street corners, pool halls, country squares. It's different now. Once in a while, one of these younger groups sounds like a dyin' calf in a hailstorm. But music's music. If you love it, what's the difference?"