

Peter Cowap - Middleton Guitarist & Songwriter



Maria with Danny Hardman (right) and Olaf (left)



The Country Gentlemen



The Mockingbirds with their single - How to Find a Lover

Legendary Middleton guitarist Peter Cowap is the subject of a History and Discography which has been compiled by his biggest fan, Olaf Owre. Olaf has allowed us to make a copy of his work for the local studies library at Middleton. It includes a full, illustrated discography and articles from the music press and the Middleton Guardian. We would welcome any additional information, so if you knew Peter or heard him perform please let us know. We can put you in touch with Olaf or send your information to him.

Born in Middleton, Peter began his musical career in the late 50's, when at the tender age of 15, he toured with Marty Wilde and Joe Brown. He was a member of the popular Middleton band, the Tremors and in 1963 he formed the Country Gents, who had a top twenty hit, and toured Germany. He worked in America for a few years with the Budgies, before becoming involved with Herman's Hermits. He wrote tracks for Wayne Fontana and 10cc, and was musical arranger for Lulu. He attended Moorclose Secondary School, was brought up in Rhodes and his parents owned a shop in Alkrington. He lived in New Moston for the latter part of his life and played occasional gigs at the Bricklayers, Railway and other Middleton pubs. He died in July 1997 aged 53.

Local man Danny Hardman has researched the music scene in Middleton in the 50's and 60's. He has written articles for the Middleton Guardian, which are available in Middleton library. He has also donated a double CD of Cowap's music, which you can listen to in the library.

Here are just a few of the 141 pages of the History and Discography. Thank you to Olaf Owre and Danny Hardman for sharing their research with us. Olaf Owre examines the career of one of Manchester's premier guitarists - a local legend whose recordings from the 1960s and 1970s include collaborations and sessions with assorted notables such as Graham Gouldman, John Paul Jones, Herman's Hermits and 10cc.

Legend

Peter Cowap is a local legend in Manchester. He has been around for ages without ever really making a big commercial breakthrough as a recording artist. Yet Cowap's contribution to the music scene as guitarist, singer and songwriter is definitely worth a closer look.

Of special interest to a number of collectors are perhaps Cowap's 1960s collaborations with Graham Gouldman (later of 10cc), which included John Paul Jones (later of Led Zeppelin) on the , sessions. Cowap's early-1970s sessions at Strawberry Studios with 10cc and as a member of the Hermits, also produced some highly enjoyable and collectable records, and more material remains unreleased.

Aggressive

In the early 1960s Peter Cowap emerged as a highly talented Manchester-guitarist using Buddy Knox as stage name, he also worked with a local group called The Tremors, and with Jimmy Justice, who was a quite successful recording artist at the time.

Cowap had extraordinary ability on guitar and-developed a unique sound - a kind of fusion of the Chet Atkins and Buddy Holly styles. He was also one of the first to stuff one amp into another to get a better sound.

1963 saw him form his own group called The Country Gentlemen. Not to be confused with another group by the same name existing from 1959 to 1962 and who subsequently were the nucleus of The Yardbirds, the Mancunian Country Gentlemen were a trio, and in addition to frontman/guitarist Peter Cowap included Nick Duval on bass and Leo Larty on drums.

With a repertoire of rhythm & blues-influenced beat, the group soon rose to local fame by playing clubs in and around Manchester. They got a recording deal with Decca and cut a single with Mike Smith as producer. Released in November 1963, the single coupled a very aggressive, rough-sounding rendition of "Greensleeves", arranged by Cowap, with B-side "Baby Jean" - a powerful R&B-number written by Hawkins-Magill-Helm.

Although not a success in terms of sales, it was a great record, very representative of the group's high-energy on stage performances at the time.

Unmistakable

The Country Gentlemen undoubtedly had a vast potential and it seems strange that no swift follow-up single was released by Decca. The group's line-up was augmented to a four-piece in 1964 when Terry Morton was recruited to play guitar alongside Cowap. A later line-up featured Rod Clare on bass, ex-member of The Emperors Of Rhythm and later a member of Wayne Fontana & The Opposition. In 1965 the Country Gents wanted to record Graham Gouldman's "Look Through Any Window", but The Hollies had the priority and their version reached No.4 in the UK charts.

However, The Country Gentlemen did resurface on record that same year, backing girl singer Little Frankie on her three singles for Columbia. All the songs, several of which were written by Silverman-Lisberg-Gouldman, bear the unmistakable stamp of the deft Country Gents arrangements and style, with Peter Cowap's guitar craftsmanship as a key factor.

But despite strong support from Charles Silverman and Harvey Lisberg, the management team of Herman's Hermits and The Mockingbirds (featuring Graham Gouldman), none of Little Frankie's singles made the charts, and her recording career soon fizzled out.

Cowap, however, had gained recognition in the business for his musicianship and songwriting skills, and several groups and artists made use of his musical services in the mid and late 1960s. Among them were The Measles, a beat/R&B-group from Manchester who recorded for Columbia. They were led by vocalist Stan "Red" Hoffman and also included Wyn Davies, Jomo Smith, Dave Earl and Ray Mondell. Cowap provided his fellow-Mancunians with two songs and also helped out on the recording sessions.

"Dog Rough Dan", co-written by Cowap-Hoffman-Lisberg, sounded like an old traditional folk song given a beat treatment! It was released as the B-side of the group's second single for Columbia, "Night People", out in August 1965. Later Cowap came up with the A-side of The Measles' fourth and what was to be their last single on the Columbia label, titled "Walkin' In" and released in October 1966. It was a cleverly constructed pop tune with interesting guitar work by Cowap, and a very commercial chorus sounding almost like Herman's Hermits! The song screamed out as a big success, but despite the use of famous producers such as Mickie Most on earlier releases and Mike Collier on "Walkin' In", hits proved to be elusive for The Measles. A later line-up of the group included ex-Toggery Five member Paul Young (later of Sad Cafe fame), but no more records were released.

Hungry

In 1966 ex-Searchers bassist/singer, Tony Jackson, also picked a Peter Cowap-song as the A-side of a new single.

Titled "You're My Number One" It was a good Hollies-flavoured number released on CBS, but unfortunately it failed to live up to its optimistic title!

Also hungry for a hit-single were London's cult R&B-group, The Downliners Sect, who had tried almost everything (including country & western!) without chart success. Nearing the end of their career they turned to hit-songwriter Graham Gouldman for a song, and he came up with "The Cost Of Living", co-written by Peter Cowap.

Producer Mike Collier and the group were so impressed by Gouldman and Cowap's demo of the song, that they only added Don Craine's vocals to the track and had it released!

The song revolved around spending money, and with lyrics like "...the wheel is always spinning, but someone else is winning.." it was quite pertinent to the situation of both Gouldman, Cowap and The Downliners Sect at the time.

The single was released in September 1966 and was to be The Downliners Sect's last record on Columbia, but again the group were unable to impress the record buying public.

Gouldman's own group, The Mockingbirds, who in addition to their leader comprised Kevin Godley (later of 10cc) on drums, Bernard Basso on bass and Stephen Jacobson on guitar, also desperately needed a hit single. So far they had

released two singles on Columbia, one on Andrew Oldham's Immediate label and one on Decca during 1965-66. All flops.

For their next Decca single the group chose "How To Find A Lover" written by Peter Cowap as the A-side, with "My Story", another Gouldman song on the flip. Cowap supposedly also appeared on the recording sessions, which were supervised by Noel Walker.

Released in October 1966, "How To Find A Lover" was a crafty pop tune given a powerful and vibrant arrangement by the group, but once again they failed to make the charts.

In retrospect The Mockingbirds' lack of commercial success can only be put down to an incredible run of bad luck and perhaps lack of proper promotion. Musically the group were certainly on par with the majority of their contemporaries, and they had one of the best songwriters of the decade in their ranks, Graham Gouldman. He had written "For Your Love" for the Yardbirds, "Bus Stop" for The Hollies and "No Milk Today" for Herman's Hermits, all massive worldwide hits. But for The Mockingbirds it just didn't work.

Mob

Gouldman tried to expand upon his songwriting success with a solo career, and he had in fact made a solo single on Decca before The Mockingbirds split up. Nevertheless he maintained a close working relationship with Peter Cowap throughout the sixties, and together they launched some very interesting studio projects on record.

In 1966 they brought a few people together in the studio to record a Gouldman-song titled "People Passing By". The group, called High Society, comprised Peter Cowap, Christine Ebbrell, Friday Brown and Keith Lawless. Also on the sessions were notables such as Phil Dennys, Clem Cattini and John Paul Jones (later of Led Zeppelin).

The blend of voices on the recording was perfect for the song, which was released by Fontana in November 1966. The B-side, "Star Of Eastern Street", written by Peter Cowap, was a ballad with distinct eastern influences, also covered by Wayne Fontana on his 1966 solo album "Wayne One".

The High Society single went absolutely nowhere, but never giving up, Gouldman and Cowap soon returned with a new studio project.

This time billed as The Manchester Mob, Cowap and Gouldman revived two classic rock'n'roll songs in one, "Bony Maronie At The Hop". again using Phil Dennys, Clem Cattini and John Paul Jones as session men. Produced by Mike Collier and released on Parlophone in January 1967, it was a fantastic record, packed with energy, but rather unfashionable at a time when the hippie fad was coming in big.

The B-side, "Afro-Asian", credited to Plonk, was a kind of tribute to the new influences from other parts of the world entering rock music at the time.

Another hard-to-find single from 1966 is a US only release on Epic by a quartet called The Pop Art, assumably Americans, with a coloured frontman. The single coupled the Cowap-written "Rumpelstiltskin", an interesting blend of British beat music and soul, with B-side "Ode To An Unknown Girl", both numbers produced by Weiss-Slater.

"Rumpelstiltskin" was also recorded by UK group The Magic Lanterns in 1966, using a home-made instrument, which gave their version of the song a very distinctive sound. It was produced by Graham Gouldman, and probably featured Peter Cowap in some capacity or other.

Prophetic

Gouldman's connection with Herman's Hermits as songwriter and session man occasionally is well known. He originated a string of songs for the group including "No Milk Today". "East West" and "Listen People", which were big hits everywhere. Peter Cowap also worked from time to time with Herman's Hermits in the sixties. In 1967 he wrote two songs for the group's "Blaze" album. Although not considered as hit-material the fact remains that Cowap's songs. "Last Bus Home" and "Ace, King, Queen, Jack" are among the group's best ever recordings. The songs were an attempt at a rougher, more contemporary style, and as far as the lyrics of "Ace, King, Queen, Jack" go, they pretty well surmised the growing friction between Peter Noone and the rest of the group at the time, as if he regards the four Hermits as a hand in a card game he is about to lose by default!

Prophetic or not, Cowap was to replace Peter Noone as lead singer of the group a few years later.

Derek Leckenby confirms that Cowap in addition to writing the two songs, also appeared on the recording sessions of the "Blaze" album. Earlier he had played on "The Man With The Cigar" from 1965, and it's quite likely that he appeared on a few other tracks as well.

Leckenby had already in a 1964 NME-interview mentioned The Country Gentlemen as one of his favourite groups, and they had been friends since the early days of the Mancunian beat scene.

As a favour the Hermits chose Cowap's "Last Bus Home" as the B-side of the Donovan-written "Museum" in the US, which on paper looked like a chart certainty. But another case of bed luck struck, as the single was the first of their US' releases to flop completely.

Safari

Manager Harvey Lisberg of Kennedy Street Enterprises saw Peter Cowap's potential as singer and guitarist and signed him up as a solo artist at around 1970. He got a recording deal with Pye and soon entered Strawberry Studios in Stockport with the future members of 10cc as sessioners. Also on the sessions was guitarist Graham Caunce, ex-member of another Manchester-group called The Scorpions, who had been very successful hitmakers in Holland in the mid-1960s. Caunce was a member of Cowap's band in the late-1960s and early 1970s, working a lot at Stockport's legendary Poco-a-Poco club.

Cowap's first solo single was released by Pye in August 1970 and coupled "Crickets" with "Wicked Melinda", both written by Cowap-Hillary. It has later been revealed that Hillary was in fact a pseudonym used by Graham Gouldman occasionally.

The single was an interesting solo debut. "Crickets" had fascinating rhythm, very unusual in style, with a strong lead vocal job by Cowap. He had obviously drawn inspiration for the song from a previous trip to Congo, as was the case with many of the songs he wrote.

"Crickets" got a bit of airplay but not enough to secure a chart entry, though it was bubbling under the Top 50 for a while.

In March 1971 a follow-up single was released, again with two songs written by Cowap-Gouldman. The A-side, "Man With The Golden Gun", was an excellent high-pitched vocal performance on a chug-along kind of rhythm. A very clever song which got good reviews, but failed to do the trick chartwise. The B-side, "Tampa Florida", was a more routine rock number, reportedly also covered by US bubblegum group Ohio Express, though extremely hard to find on record. Only demo copies are believed to exist.

A third strong attempt to break the charts was made with the release of "Safari" coupled with "Oh Soloman" in June 1971. Again both songs were written by Cowap-Gouldman.

The lyrics of "Safari" took Cowap back to Africa, and an infectious reggae beat with a heavy bass and guitars shuffling along, and nice close vocals, gave the track an instant appeal.

The B-side, "Oh Soloman", combined a semi ska-beat with a country-tinged guitar sound. As always, the backing was professionally executed by the members of 10cc with Eric Stewart as producer, but unfortunately the single fared no better than its two predecessors.

Cowap's love for the movies often influenced his songwriting as evidenced in the lyrics of "Safari": "After I'd seen The African Queen I wanted to go on safari...", which refers to the classic Humphrey Bogart/Katharine Hepburn movie from 1951.

In the song "Ace, King, Queen, Jack" recorded by Herman's Hermits in 1967, Cowap mentions the famous movie actress Betty Grable.

One of his favourite movies was "Lawrence Of Arabia". which he saw 7-8 times! Graham Caunce, who has been a friend of Peter's since around 1962, recalls how they used to drive around on their motorbikes at the time. Caunce had a big Triumph and Cowap had a Royal Enfield, and once they drove from Manchester to Liverpool just to watch "Lawrence Of Arabia" in a big cinema there!

Afternoon (E)

When Peter Noone left Herman's Hermits to go solo in 1971, Peter Cowap replaced him as lead vocalist of the group. After three unsuccessful solo-singles this seemed a logical move and his distinctive tones added a considerable appeal to the Hermits' sound.

They signed with RCA and their first single, "She's A Lady", written by another Mancunian, Jeff Smith. The song was an upbeat, commercial country-number with an arrangement sounding a lot like McGuinness Flint's "When I'm Dead And Gone". The B-side, "Gold Mandela", penned by the group, was a more complex type of song, with an interesting interplay between acoustic and electric guitars, and a lot of work laid down on the harmony vocals.

Eric Stewart produced the single which was released in October 1971. It was well-received by the music press, but failed to make the British charts. Actually, sales were better on the Continent, where it was released with a picture cover.

RCA also fronted them with the money to record an album, which kept them busy writing and rehearsing new material before entering Strawberry Studios for extensive recording sessions.

Cowap had a hand in writing the majority of the songs for the album, which was an attempt at a completely new style for the group. Combining alt. rock, country, blues and soul, the "new" Hermits sounded like a cross between The Band and Jerry Reed!

It was a very promising album, given the title "Whale Of A Tale". after alternatives "Whale And Chips" and "Good Afternoon" (After Noone!) had been decided against. Outstanding tracks were "Privateer" with its immaculate a cappella harmonies, "Witchazel" with a strange, ominous guitar sound, and "Small Island Boy". a sublime blend of blues and country with a frantic vocal performance by Cowap. The songs on the album were superbly fitted for Cowap's voice, and he sang lead on all selections except "Awake For The Morning", which was done by Karl Green. Cowap also played acoustic and electric guitars, as well as mandolin on certain tracks.

Green recalls how they had problems recording the finger style acoustic guitar intro of "Witchazel". While the others headed for the pub. Cowap remained in the studio

rehearsing the difficult bit. When the rest of the group came back, producer Eric Stewart had recorded Cowap's rehearsal and it was perfect.

One of the songs on the album. "Prohibition", was re-recorded by a later line-up of the group. Retitled "Ride On The Water", it was out on Buddah/Pye in 1976. Awaiting the release of "Whale Of A Tale" The Hermits were rehearsing and gigging In England, and also did a tour of Denmark in 1972 to promote their forthcoming album.

Lol Creme and Kevin Godley had done the album cover design, a fine drawing based on the "whale & chips" idea.

However, when the acetates had been pressed up and the release date was finally set, the group's main connection at RCA had a heart attack and the album got shelved! It was just politics in the record company and several artists got in the same boat with RCA at the time.

The "Whale Of A Tale" album was a brave effort and certainly warranted being released. When Karl Green asked for an explanation he was literally thrown out of RCA's offices!

RCA did. however, release a second single by The Hermits in September 1972, "The Man" coupled with "Effen Curly", both penned by the group. "The Man" was a pounding march-tempo number with haunting vocals and a low-keyed chorus, creating a mood well fitted for Cowap's lyrics about the Congo war. The B-side was actually titled "Essen Curly", though RCA made a mistake at the pressing plant. It was a decent rendition of Flying Burrito Brothers-styled country-rock.

Two strong tracks, but It just didn't seem the right kind of material for a single, and with practically no promotion effort from RCA the single didn't have much chance to make the charts.

Cherished

Disillusioned the Hermits decided to go back to their old popular style and do cabaret again, while Peter Cowap quit to form a new band called Grumble. This rather shortlived outfit released a single on RCA in June 1973, and now Cowap seemed to be going the Dave Edmunds-route with a driving falsetto-version of Greenwich-Barry-Spector's classic "Da Doo Ron Ron". The B-side, "Pig Bin An' Gone". was an instrumental sounding oddly like 10cc. It was in fact written by Stewart-Creme-Gouldman-Godley, and both tracks were recorded at Strawberry Studios with 10cc as producers!

Since the mid-seventies Cowap has been working as a solo performer, mainly doing country clubs and the pub circuit in Manchester and the north of England. He is still writing new songs. like "Swamp Man", a kind of "Safari"/"Cricketts" revisited, which unfortunately remains unavailable on record. Cowap has come to

terms with his present , but recalls with fondness the early sixties, and meeting with John Lennon when The Beatles and The Country Gentlemen played the same venues. Those were magic times.

10cc once championed Cowap and attempted to capture his magic on record. The results were superlative, and the recordings have stood the test of time. Someone should consider releasing a Peter Cowap compilation, for characters like Cowap are to be cherished.

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Olaf Owre

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