

Voyager

The MagellanMusic Newsletter

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1968

That year and number somehow conjures images of violence and unrest. There were the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, numerous riots, the massive brawl at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, even a prison riot in Ohio. But history revisionists always pick a particular theme for various subjects and 1968 was a troubled year somehow related to the hippie generation. Except it's not true. The 1960's in general were violent not because of the counter-culture, but because of the Establishment trying to stop it. There had never been such an immense social revolution, and the status quo simply didn't know how to deal with it. No discussion or attempt to understand it, just hassle or beat anybody who questioned authority then arrest them and maybe they'll shut up. It went as far back as 1963 when police let dogs loose on a peaceful civil rights demonstration in Birmingham, Alabama, or the police attack on peaceful protesters at a Connecticut college in 1966, or numerous police attacks on political/social rallies throughout the 1960's.

Realistically, 1968 was little more than an extension of 1967. There was a good share of violence in '67, but the media allowed the 'Summer of Love' to prevail. So in 1968, despite the media attention on social discord, the vast majority of hippies were the same. They ignored the Establishment by exemplifying the lifestyle of peace and love as they wished and carried on regardless. So did musicians, writers, painters, sculptors, designers – collectively the entire artistic community. The karma so strong and widespread that it reached all the way into suburban homes via TV, radio, music, books, magazines, advertising, marketing and merchandising, including children products and comic books. But more than anything, the counter-culture refused to let the ceaseless propaganda beat them into submission. Music, the arts and spiritual resurgence fed, bred and led the movement like pied pipers. 1968 was part of the psychedelic era, and as influential as the year before. Enough so that the jovial hippie saying "Keep On Truckin'" soon became their motto. Here are some musical highlights of 1968:

Great albums of 1968:

The Beatles - White Album: there has been so much said about this album that practically anything one says is repetitive, so maybe the best compliment is it was THE album of 1968. It seemed to capture the essence of life-as-we-know-it. So sprawling that it was unlike any other Beatle album, a virtual A-Z encyclopedia of contemporary Pop. It gave some listeners a mixed feeling, as if the album didn't have a real direction, but after realizing that was precisely the point there was no doubt that the White Album was the most adventurous album of the year. Possibly of their entire catalog.

Pink Floyd - A Saucerful of Secrets: it is arguably the very first real 'progressive rock' album. At times it was dreamy, experimental, laden with sound effects, but certain tracks were so avant-garde that listeners were euphemistically taken into the stratosphere. It was a real surprise to Pink Floyd fans considering their main man, Syd Barrett, was essentially gone. Saucerful was a distinct departure from the classic psychedelic sound of their debut album. But the karma from this LP is what gave Pink Floyd its permanent image, an ethos of exploration that numerous other bands would soon follow.

Jimi Hendrix - Electric Ladyland: At a time when experimentation was to the fore, this album fit the bill. Strangely enough, it was much like the Beatles White Album in that a few songs had that classic Hendrix sound, but a lot of them went in different directions. The double-album motif obviously allowed him to be more imaginative thus the departure from the usual vibe. It wasn't quite what fans expected, but as all good albums do, "Electric Ladyland" went on to be considered by many fans his best work.

Janis Joplin & Big Brother - Cheap Thrills: It was this album that unleashed Janis Joplin to the listening world. She had wowed the crowd at the Monterey Pop Festival a year earlier, and the music press gladly spread the word (as well as their first album jumping in sales), but "Cheap Thrills" revealed how powerful a singer she really was. Even her boisterous presence was somehow, magically, captured on audio. They were no longer Big Brother featuring Janis Joplin, she was now center stage.

Jefferson Airplane - Crown of Creation: They were at the top of their game in 1968. The Airplane were a definitive picture of psychedelic rock. So entrancing that they didn't need hit songs any more, they explored different genres, exemplified what would later be called 'album tracks', all just as accessible as the Top 40. This album was a prime choice in 1968 and one of their best ever.

Wheels of Fire - Cream: If their previous "Disraeli Gears" was their flowering, then "Wheels of Fire" was their taking flight. It too was a double-album, one live and one studio, and they stretched into all kinds of directions. Such as the wistful "As You Said", or the Establishment satire "Anyone For Tennis?". Some think the album was a bit too much, but if one were to try picking Cream's best, this would qualify.

Doors - Waiting For The Sun: A few critics thought of this album, their third, as something of a let-down from the strength of their first, but some thought the same of all their following albums. It was a bit mellower, quieter in a way, but there were several classic tracks, including "Hello I Love You" and "Spanish Caravan", as well as "The Unknown Soldier", as fierce an anti-war song as one will find anywhere; worthy for the times.

Country Joe & the Fish - Together: Even though it featured a terrible album cover, it was their best album yet. Their reputation for social and anti-Establishment satire was already strong, but this one solidified it. Plus, various band members wrote more songs which gave an imaginative, varied feel, as well as the band itself more polished. And to top it off, the closing track, "An Untitled Protest", was downright chilling. A harsh, no-holds-barred look at the world that gave the album a startling impact.

Steppenwolf - Steppenwolf and The Second: It's rare to see an artist release 2 albums the same year, and even more rare that both established not only the genre of 'hard rock' but featured songs that were soon-to-be anthems of the entire hippie generation. This was a case of not deciding which album was the best or which one to have, one simply had to have both.

Iron Butterfly - In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida: When one thinks of albums that best typify the psychedelic era, this is one of them. The title track alone is so strong that it became a staple of almost every bar band in the country. Plus, at 17 minutes, it was possibly the first to take up an entire album side. But most forget that side one is a great collection of

first-class sunshine pop. Too bad they left this genre way too soon.

Tommy James & the Shondells – Crimson and Clover: The title alone says it all. This and “Crystal Blue Persuasion”, both timeless Top 40 hits and perfect examples of the hippie generation, would make it a classic even if the other songs weren't that good. But they were good indeed. It was actually released in January of '69 but was 1968 for the band through and through. Definitely what they will always be remembered for.

Chad & Jeremy – The Ark: This album was a jaw-dropper as was their album from 1967. They got the image of a British Invasion duo like Peter & Gordon, a trend which was gone by 1966, thus the public couldn't grasp the idea that Chad & Jeremy had progressed to the point of being a legit 'psychedelic' band. So good that a casual listener for both albums wouldn't believe who it is. A true loss to typically inquisitive listeners.

Pretty Things - S.F. Sorrow: Still another double-album that caught listeners off-guard. So good that it went on to be their magnum opus. It was a 'concept' album telling the story of a man coming to terms with the difficulties of life, a metaphor of his last name Sorrow, filled with experimental and innovative sounds guided by producer Norman Smith whose technical prowess was well known. “S.F. Sorrow” was so influential that the Who's “Tommy” and Pink Floyd's “The Wall” were clear echoes of it.

H.P. Lovecraft – H.P. Lovecraft II: Some bands had the luxury of support from their record label, but unfortunately, these guys didn't. Combining elements of psychedelic and folk rock the band's sound was marked by first rate songwriting skills, striking vocal harmonies, imaginative use of keyboards and various instruments - all resulting in a haunting ambiance equal to big names in music at the time.

Peanut Butter Conspiracy – The Great Conspiracy: One would think a quality band from LA and part of the San Francisco scene would have some kind of lasting impact, but strangely they didn't. In 1968 they were at the top of their game, this was their best album, which was less 'produced' and more as they were live, and they shared the stage many times with major names like Joplin and Jefferson Airplane. If only they had caught on...

Tangerine Zoo - Outside Looking In: Most don't know there were more artists signed in the 1960's than at any other time, and it could be said that the problem was too many were good. America was a huge market but just not enough room to hold it all. That's why creative and colorful bands like Tangerine Zoo didn't survive long. But in 1968, when at their best, the freedom of creativity that this album expresses so well was a prize catch for any fan of psychedelia.

United States of America – (self-titled): If there was a surprise band or album hard to match, this was it. 'Revolutionary' is a good word to describe it. Up there with Pink Floyd's album from 1968. A nice mix of psychedelia/experimental/avant-garde more in favor of keyboards and sound effects than guitar, a strong step toward the popular phrase to come later, 'art rock'. Unfortunately, there was no way for such an unusual band to maintain live work, which is a necessity in music, thus a one-album-wonder.

Chocolate Watch Band - Inner Mystique: Maybe a B-level band, but so inspiring to the producer that he personally created several tracks (using session musicians) that the

band didn't play a single note on. But that's the point. They were such an unlikely group of creative misfits that in order to compliment their sparkle the producer took no credit for what he did. They were unique and deserved accolades for it, just unlucky in not finding a way to break through to the big time.

July – (self-titled): As retailers will tell anyone, when good products don't sell it doesn't make any sense. Here we had a young band full of imagination in the midst of the psychedelic boom with an album full of clever songs, good vocals, a trippy atmosphere, eerie at times, and a sound all their own. The album died, as did the band, but unexpectedly became a highly sought-after collector's item.

There are numerous other albums that could be mentioned, but these are musical highlights from the incredibly creative year of 1968.

Fantastic news - the Music Modernization Act passed the House...

The "music omnibus" bill was approved unanimously, 415-0, the first significant piece of legislation regarding music in two decades. At its core is a recognition of the puzzling relationship that the music industry has with streaming companies and the digital age of music in general. The bill will establish a public database of compositions showing who owns them, who wrote them, and who administers them. This will be accomplished by establishing a new non-governmental organization called the Music Licensing Collective to run that database. It will be a board made up of representatives from the major publishing companies and songwriters themselves.

In addition, the music omnibus bill also includes three other pieces of legislation: the Allocation for Music Producers (AMP), the Compensating Legacy Artists for their Songs, Service, and Important Contributions to Society (or CLASSICS, an acronym which lawmakers were reaching for), and Songwriter Equity acts, all to give much more to artists and producers that stream companies have ignored.

With streaming in double digit increases, and badly inadequate governance, the Music Modernization Act is a giant step forward for artists and producers alike. Now the question is how soon the Senate can make possible changes and put the new laws in place.

Just as good as the Music Modernization Act, royalty rates will go up...

A new ruling from the US Government requires that streaming music services raise their royalty rates for songwriters and music publishers. Hearings were held from March to June of 2017 to make a determination, and on Saturday, January 28th, it issued its long awaited decision. For the next five years (from 2018 – 2022) the per-stream royalty rate for mechanical royalties will increase incrementally from the current 10.5% of Gross revenue to 15.1%, one of the highest rates in the world. If the music services pay the royalties late, they will be charged a late fee. If a record label negotiates a higher rate for the recording (as there is no government regulation or rate for recordings), then the royalty rate for the composition can also increase. With other more technical rulings included it altogether makes it clear that streaming services can no longer pay such pathetic royalties to the musicians who make streaming possible.

The grand old stereo systems refuse to die...

As we old-timers like to say, "Those were the days." When stereo systems started improving in the 1960's it got to the point where a good home stereo was a badge of honor. Real music heads considered Sears or K-Mart systems insulting junk. Even

compact discs and players were a nice addition to classic components, but the digital age progressed rapidly and sales of analog equipment declined. By the turn of the century surround sound for both TV and music became the rage, as well as other digital listening formats, all a very different style of listening. The classic analog systems were 'old', a thing of the past, except for those who refused to give it up. Thankfully, today there is a resurgence of it best exemplified by the surprising popularity of vinyl LP's and turntables. It is now learned that there are several repair companies who restore amps, receivers, speakers and various other analog devices to near original condition. For those who wish for high quality vintage equipment again here are a few such companies to consider:

<http://www.soundclassic.com/>

<http://www.audioclassics.com/>

<http://www.oaktreevintage.com/>

<https://www.cnn.com/2013/09/27/tech/innovation/death-stereo-system/index.html>

Remember when we thought vinyl LP's were dead?

Well, Frankenstein has done his work. LP's are back and they aren't leaving any time soon. Since 2007 sales of vinyl LP's have increased from less than 1 million to an estimate of over 15 million for 2018. It's a small number for the industry as a whole, but almost unbelievable for that format. It's like contemporary and veteran hipsters are re-discovering the glory years of the 1960's and 70's. It's also a coincidental if not symbolic reality of big changes in marijuana laws. And if that's not enough, the two best selling vinyl LP's according to Nielsen are "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" and "Abbey Road" by the Beatles. 'Nuff said.

Until next time!

"It was the free-thinking, creative, inquisitive, compassionate, out-spoken souls of heart and spirit that made the hippie generation so unforgettable. Those who can't live it now never had it in the first place." - unknown